

Getting to know the Nurburgring

So it's no longer the legendary 'Green Hell' feared by all and sundry (safety considerations have turned it into more of a 'Green Heck'). But it's still the Nurburgring, one of the best-loved tracks on the F1 calendar.

Renault's James Allison had an interesting point to make about racing at a circuit every other year in the height of a technological arms' race: The "Nurburgring does not have any particular outstanding features, but it provides a fair all round test of the performance of a car," he said.

"Probably the most unusual aspect of Nurburgring is that we only go there every two years. It is standard practice to consult the notes from the previous year prior to going to each circuit and, in Nurburgring's case, these notes are two years out of date and therefore less helpful in offering pre-event guidance. For example: last time we were at Nurburgring not a single car on the grid had a blown diffuser."

Food for thought, certainly – given that none of the teams have experience of maximizing blown diffuser gains around the 'Ring, Friday's practice sessions should see a lot of preparatory groundwork as the teams try to establish just what their cars are capable of.

Another unknown quantity this weekend will be the performance of the Pirelli tyres.

"The Nurburgring is one of the most technical circuits we face all year, with a lot of lateral energy going through the tyres, and this makes strategy very important," Pirelli motorsport director Paul Hembery said. "Although they sit next to each other in our range, there is still a significant difference between the P Zero Yellow soft and the P Zero White medium tyre, as we saw on the last occasion that this combination was used at the Grand Prix of Europe in Valencia.

"The biggest difference will be the weather, which could be a lot cooler than the conditions we saw in Spain. This means that we expect most of the teams to adopt a two-stop strategy, unless of course it rains, in which case anything is possible," he continued.

"On Friday, the teams will be evaluating a new version of the P Zero Yellow soft tyre. It's not a big change from the current specification, but it is designed to fit in line with our latest versions of the P Zero Silver hard tyre and P Zero White medium, both of which are a little harder than their original specification in order to reduce degradation. There's no decision yet on when we might use the new tyre yet, but it will be very interesting to hear all the feedback from the teams," Hembery concluded.

While the Grand Prix circuit (built in 1984, and modified over the years) has never been known for its wealth of overtaking opportunities, the combination of potentially dodgy weather, unknown tyre performance, and the DRS, could shake up the action on track.

According to defending world champion Sebastian Vettel, "the best place to overtake is before the NGK chicane – which is a challenging left-right bend. It's possible to overtake on the brakes there, because you come out of the previous corner and have to brake down to 100kph. Hitting the brakes later means you can take the bend first, it sounds easy but it's not because you have to keep away from the kerbs or the car lifts off and you get overtaken again."

But the biggest challenge at the 'Ring isn't overtaking, it's finding the right set-up for the car.

"The circuit itself presents a complete challenge: there are three corners below 100kph as well as three over 250kph, so good performance at both low and high speeds is critical," Norbert Haug noted.

Sauber technical director James Key went into more detail concerning the inherent challenge in finding the ideal set-up for the Nurburgring's mix of corners.

"The Nurburgring is quite a mixed circuit with different features, which makes it hard to characterise," Key said. "Good braking stability is important into Turn 1, where there is a potential overtaking opportunity. The first sector is relatively low speed, or at least is after turn one which results in a car which needs good traction and good levels of downforce. Then there is a high speed section down to the hairpin, which presents another overtaking opportunity. The second half to the lap is relatively high speed.

"Primarily it consists of medium and slow speed corners and a couple of relatively long straights with a chicane in the end and a difficult last corner," Key continued. "This is a challenge for the engineers and drivers to try and get it right particularly in qualifying. It's going to be an interesting weekend, because there are many different challenges with the big mix of corners and straights."

While the circuit presents technical challenges to drivers and engineers alike, the Nurburgring is surprisingly gentle on fuel consumption and engine wear. The high average speeds lead to average fuel consumption of around 2.6kg per lap, while engines are at full throttle for between 50 percent and 60 percent of the lap.

One thing to watch out for this weekend is the brakes, specifically getting them up to temperature. In this respect, the cool and frequently wet Nurburgring is pretty similar to Silverstone. F1 brakes work at their optimum when they're at temperatures hot enough to make the sun sweat. But in cool and soggy climates (Spa is another such race) it can be a real struggle to get the brakes up to operating temperatures.

The current configuration of the Nurburgring has been in use since 2003 (alternate races have taken place at Hockenheim since 2008), when the track was extended by a mind-blowing 0.002km following 2001's addition of the Mercedes Arena, and measures 5.148km. Presuming it runs for the full distance, the German Grand Prix will last for 60 laps, bringing the total distance run to 308.863 kilometres.

The group of past Nurburgring winners currently racing in F1 is pretty small: Mark Webber (2009), Fernando Alonso (2005, 2007), Michael Schumacher (1995 [old layout], 2000 [old layout], 2001 [old layout], 2004, 2006), and Rubens Barrichello (2002).

The group of previous pole sitters is equally small: Mark Webber (2009), Fernando Alonso (2006), Nick Heidfeld (2005), and Michael Schumacher (1998 [old layout], 2001 [old layout], 2004).

Fastest laps at the 'Ring have been claimed by Fernando Alonso (2005, 2009), Felipe Massa (2007), and Michael Schumacher (2000 [old layout], 2002, 2004, 2006).

The current lap record at the Nurburgring is Michael Schumacher's 2004 time of 1:29.468s, set at an average speed of 207.144kph.

One thing to look forward to this weekend will be Schumacher's first experience of driving through the Schumacher S. Following the German legend's initial retirement in 2006, the Audi S was renamed in his honour. Now that he's back behind the wheel, he will have a bizarre experience of powering round bends named after him.

F1 Germany Blog - Thursday press conference at the Nurburgring

Nurburgring, Thursday afternoon. The press conference room is filled to bursting with 25 percent of the grid's drivers, also known as the six Germans for whom this is their home grand prix: Timo Glock (Virgin), Nick Heidfeld (Renault), Nico Rosberg (Mercedes), Michael Schumacher (Mercedes), Adrian Sutil (Force India), and Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull).

Given that the press conference was an all-German affair, it's hardly surprising that the drivers were asked why their country dominates modern Formula 1. The answer is unlikely to surprise you...

The Schumacher influence cannot be discounted, but the German elder statesman of the sport was modest in his response.

"Why?," Schumacher asked. "At the moment, I think the general reason is that we have a huge German industry for cars that is interested in Formula 1 and that in the past - not only Mercedes but other manufacturers - have invested in Formula 1 and have invested in young driver programmes and still do. So motor sport in general is of a much higher importance than it used to be and there are lots of schools and talent scouts to find the drivers of the future. Luckily, because of this possibility there is a big mass of drivers anyway who do go-karts, do many, many kinds of categories, so we were lucky to establish the final six ones that you see at the moment here. This is part of the reason that finances and support have been given to us and the opportunities have been given. But then, why did we have, at certain moments, so many Brazilian drivers, so many Italian drivers? I think it's a sort of phase of life that you go through. Why were there more than 10 Italian drivers - I think even 12 or 14 Italian drivers when I started Formula 1? Why we have almost none at the moment, apart from Jarno [Author's note: what about Tonio Liuzzi?]? I don't know, whether it's just because of the financial side or whether there are other reasons or it's just coincidence."

Vettel agreed with his fellow world champion.

"I agree with what Michael says," the Red Bull driver said. "In a way, it's also as he said, sometimes you have more Italian drivers, there are a lot of French drivers. At the moment we have one Italian [Author's note: is Liuzzi invisible or something?], no French drivers. I think it changes naturally, but surely, I think for the future, it will be even more important, very difficult. I still believe we have great categories in Germany, giving chances to young drivers, but overall, I think motorsport becomes very expensive from an early age, so you need strong people behind you to support you so unfortunately it's no longer as open as maybe it used to be, just because you need so much money right from the start to go karting. I hope that in the future, there will be manufacturers like Michael said, or individual companies supporting young kids and giving them the chance to, one, have fun, and secondly, maybe live their dream and end up in Formula 1 or DTM or whatever."

Probably the most honest answer came from Rosberg: "Surely, Michael himself is also responsible for there being so many good Germans in racing, because he's the one who gave the sport such a boom in Germany, and then there's a knock-on effect from there, that more kids want to start racing, there's more money to support them and everything."

Poor Glock was largely ignored, and only got to answer two questions, both concerned with the progress at Virgin.

"To be honest, on track definitely in terms of the performance of the car I think we are not where we want to be, but in terms of changes for the future I am happy," he said. "The commitment the team made and the announcement of the partnership with McLaren is a positive sign for the future. At the moment operating on track we are getting the maximum out of our package, more than 100 percent sometimes and it is a bit unfortunate that people don't see it that we are doing a good job at the back but that's how it is. We have to make the best for next year."

Asked when he expected to see improvement, Glock replied: "It is difficult to say, depends on how quickly we can really start in terms of looking into this year's car. If we find quick improvement I think we can manage to bring an update at the end of the year, but it is too early to say. I just hope we can do a proper job in terms of the development for the 2012 year and if we have something for the 2011 year it would be great."

Heidfeld was another man asked about improvement, this time in light of Renault's recent wind tunnel upgrade, which saw the Enstone outfit move from a 50 percent wind tunnel to a 60 percent one.

"Definitely [upgrading our wind tunnel] slowed things down a bit," he said, "but in the long term it is definitely a benefit. After we changed that,

already we understood more and saw a few more directions we could develop into. We are actually bringing some bigger parts for the Nurburgring race here onto the car which hopefully will work straight away. The figures look good but it is quite big so it is going to be interesting to see the data from the circuit. I hope even more than usual we will have dry conditions as in the wet it will be more tricky to find out.”

Setting the scene for a number of harsh questions – but a welcome respite from the usual bland PR responses – Heidfeld was asked what he needed to do to hold onto his seat for next year, given that he is widely seen as Robert Kubica’s understudy.

”As always in Formula 1, you just do the best job you can,” Heidfeld said. ”I try to deliver on the circuit and then you hold talks and see how it goes. So far I think the season has gone quite well. We have had some problems over the last couple of races but were still able with the team to hold on to some points. We try to fight Mercedes, but not Sebastian, he is a bit too far a way. But trying to beat Mercedes. They just overtook us on the last race and that’s what we are targeting.”

But Heidfeld got gentle treatment compared to Schumacher, whose questions and responses have been copied in full below.

Q: Everyone is waiting for your first win since your comeback.

MS: Me too.

Q: How far away is it?

MS: Well I don’t think we are in a position yet to talk about winning races. We are on the way. We steadily improve although maybe results don’t show it but if I see in terms of the organisation how we equip ourselves, how we move forward, what’s the actions for the future, I am very optimistic to be quite honest. It wasn’t initially a long term project for me when I signed up but after a while I understood it is going to be and there is nothing that you can rush through. You have to progressively step up and that’s what we are doing.

Q: Michael, at the beginning of this season, you announced that ‘this year we will be stronger, we will be better.’ Do you remember your points and place after nine races last year? I can tell you. Thirty four points in ninth place and this year, 28 points in tenth place. Are you disappointed until now?

MS: Yes, I am, yeah, absolutely. I think we all expected something different, as we all remember coming to Australia, to the first race and we were very excited, having had a good winter test and then it didn’t transform. Now we all know the reason and now we are on the way to improve our game, but as I mentioned at the beginning and have done so very often, it’s a mission and the mission unfortunately doesn’t always go in one line upwards. It’s like a stock market: before it goes up, it falls down a couple of times and the general trend, what I can see in the factory, the progress that we are making in terms of the infrastructure, how the team is building up, I see very good signs that we can make it.

Rosberg was given the opportunity of a lifetime on Thursday morning, when he drove Juan Manuel Fangio’s W196 around the Nordschleife. Luckily for us, he was asked to describe the experience.

”It was a very, very special experience for me to drive the car which Fangio had his first win in a Mercedes in 1954 and around the Nordschleife,” Rosberg said. ”It was just a part of it, but still it was very, very nice. Even I must say I didn’t know what to expect. To drive the car was fun. It feels like a go-kart and the position is cool. The gear shifting, very easy to shift and everything, so it was great. The only thing was the driving position which was very strange. A big steering wheel and the pedals completely right and left as there was the big gearbox in the middle, right between your legs, so it was quite strange.”

In contrast, Sutil had a somewhat more negative experience in his own run on the Nordschleife...

”It was made up to be very dramatic but it was just a technical problem that I had,” he said. ”I went out of the pits and something was broken at the rear of the car so I lost control at a very slow speed and I touched a barrier at about 10kph and that’s it. Nothing really major was broken. I stopped the car there because it was not good to go back to the pits like that and I changed the car. There were a few more cars there, same ones and I had a good day, three great laps in this Gumpert Apollo, a very fast car, very amazing around this place and that was it. When I read the newspaper the next day, I was laughing really hard because they said I lost all my teeth and I just made it out of the carbon wreck of this car and I thought, OK, well, that was lucky then. So I’m in one piece and in good shape and it was just nothing to mention, really.”

Finally, the award for best response to a potentially awkward question goes to Vettel. Both question and answer have been copied in full below.

Q: Sebastian, why the hell do you have 80 points more than Mark Webber this year?

SV: I think I’ve finished in better positions in the races so far.

F1 Germany Blog - F1 at the Nurburgring

Thanks to a major transport fail, your intrepid reporter missed the bulk of F1 at the Nurburgring.

There was a car with a broken sat-nav, filled with people who spoke only Spanish and German, and a journalist who only speaks French and English. I did my best with directions, but the communication problems meant we were half-way to Koblenz before I managed to convince my fellow travellers that we should be following signs *to* the 'Ring, and not those pointing in the opposite direction.

So I arrived at the track just in time to see Sebastien Buemi come off the track at Turn 5, only moments before the end of the session. Not the impressive start to the weekend I’d hoped for.

But with Fernando Alonso fastest for Ferrari, and a list of lap times in front of me, I can make some inferences. Well, as many inferences as you can make from a practice session, anyway – the test programmes are so varied that it’s hard to know for certain.

There had been talk that the reversion to the Valencia-spec blown diffuser rules would bring an end to Ferrari’s recent spate of headline-grabbing

performances, as the Scuderia (so they said) were only improving because their main rivals were being hampered by the rule changes. But Alonso's P1 and Felipe Massa's P4 indicate that Ferrari will continue to challenge at the front, giving Red Bull and McLaren a run for their money.

The Red Bull pair were in P2 and P3, which shouldn't surprise anyone. Mark Webber was milliseconds faster than Sebastian Vettel, but the gap between the two men was so small that it barely counts as a gap.

Following what the team called an 0.8s disadvantage at Silverstone thanks to the weekend of off-throttle rule chaos, McLaren appear to be back at the business end of the pack, with Lewis Hamilton in P5 and teammate Jenson Button in P6. Button was nearly 2s down on Alonso's pace-setting time, while Hamilton was 0.3s slower than Massa.

Heikki Kovalainen finished the morning session ahead of Sauber driver Kamui Kobayashi and Williams' man Pastor Maldonado, which was good news for Lotus, but without confirmation of the planned programmes for Sauber and Williams – both of whom are testing new parts today – there's no guarantee that the Finnish driver will be in a similar position come the end of qualifying.

FP1 timings (official)

1. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.31.894s
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.32.217s
3. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.32.268s
4. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.32.681s
5. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.32.996s
6. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.33.628s
7. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.33.787s
8. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.33.832s
9. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.33.858s
10. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.33.863s
11. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.34.094s
12. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.35.115s
13. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.35.371s
14. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.35.389s
15. Nick Heidfeld (Renault) 1.35.444s
16. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.36.371s
17. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.36.392s
18. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.36.842s
19. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.36.882s
20. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.38.504s
21. Karun Chandhok (Lotus) 1.38.765s
22. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) 1.39.279s
23. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.40.109s
24. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 1.40.428s

F1 Germany Blog - FP2 at the Nurburgring

At first glance, the second practice session at Germany's legendary Nurburgring appeared to be fairly tranquil.

But there were mechanical issues for three of the grid's drivers, each of which led to reduced track time.

Sebastien Buemi was unable to set a time this afternoon; the Toro Rosso driver completed three installation laps when the telemetry showed that his engine was mis-firing in high revs. As a result, the team called him in as a safety precaution, and the Swiss driver's afternoon was over before it had truly begun.

Another man to struggle this afternoon was McLaren driver Jenson Button. The British driver had intermittent KERS problems, but the biggest issue was a failure on an experimental exhaust that the team were running. Button was only able to complete 17 laps to Lewis Hamilton's 28.

Adrian Sutil (photo by Sutton Images) Daniel Ricciardo was another driver to see serious reduced running in the second session – the Australian had completed five laps when smoke started pouring from the rear end of his HRT and he was forced to call it a day. It looked more like engine failure than burning oil, but the team have yet to confirm the exact cause of the problem.

For the rest of the grid, the session was pretty average. Ferrari were initially top of the timesheets, but Mark Webber set a 1.31.711s around an hour in to FP2 and no one was able to best him. The four fastest men were the two Red Bull drivers and the Ferrari pair. Just behind were the Mercedes drivers: Hamilton then led the Renault men, while Adrian Sutil rounded out the top ten.

Fernando Alonso had a hairy moment trying to pass Michael Schumacher on track: the Spanish driver put two wheels into the gravel when going round the hairpin, and Sebastian Vettel (Photo by Mark Thompson/Getty Images) bounced along the kerb like a child on a space-hopper.

Alonso's off was the only real incident of note: many drivers ran a bit wide but none suffered as a consequence.

FP2 timings (unofficial)

1. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.31.711s

2. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.31.879s
 3. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.32.084s
 4. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.32.354s
 5. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.32.411s
 6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.32.557s
 7. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.32.724s
 8. Nick Heidfeld (Renault) 1.33.098s
 9. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.33.138s
 10. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.33.211s
 11. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.33.225s
 12. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.33.299s
 13. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.34.113s
 14. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.34.344s
 15. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.34.487s
 16. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.34.491s
 17. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.34.996s
 18. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.35.753s
 19. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.36.940s
 20. Karun Chandhok (Lotus) 1.37.248s
 21. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 1.37.313s
 22. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) 1.38.145s
 23. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) 1.40.737s
 24. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) NO TIME SET
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F1 Germany Blog - Friday press conference at the Nurburgring

The Friday afternoon press conference tends to be the most interesting of the weekend, thanks to the presence of senior team personnel, who are less concerned with PR-friendly stock responses than the drivers they employ. Present today were James Allison (Renault), Stefano Domenicali (Ferrari), Mark Gallagher (Cosworth), Norbert Haug (Mercedes), and Monisha Kaltenborn (Sauber).

Given the recent announcement that Williams would be parting ways with Cosworth at the end of the season, reigniting the famous Williams-Renault partnership, it is hardly surprising that Gallagher was asked about the loss of the team to his company.

"It has been an interesting few weeks as the decision Williams has taken to go with Renault starting next season is, from a human point of view inside Cosworth, disappointing," he said. "From a business point of view it doesn't change anything for us because we had always planned our comeback into Formula 1 as an engine supplier based around supplying new teams with engines. It was actually very fortuitous that a team as famous and successful as Williams came along and asked us for an engine supply. Disappointing on a human level, on a business level we understand the decision and we are just looking to the future now.

"We have got two new teams that have recently announced big changes," Gallagher continued. "The Marussia Virgin Racing deal with McLaren Applied Technologies is a very interesting one, particularly for us to work with McLaren and Marussia Virgin from next season. Then with the recent changes at Hispania Racing in terms of investment in the team, fresh investment, I think everyone can see HRT has made some good steps this season. Business continues. I think we have been quoted as saying and quite rightly that since 1963 Cosworth has supplied 67 different teams with engines. Actually 10 of the teams on the grid today in some form or other have used our engines in Formula 1 so I am confident that we will have many good days ahead. The quest for us really is to secure long-term contracts, certainly beyond the V8 era, and with the exciting news of the arrival of the V6 engines for 2014, that's more of a focus for us at the moment so onwards and upwards."

Gallagher was also asked about the forthcoming changes to engine specifications, and the impact that would have on Cosworth.

"It is a significant investment but maybe in the mists of time people have overlooked the fact that the current engine, the CA, which started life in 2006 was created by Cosworth as an independent company in the post-Ford era," Gallagher said. "We have invested significant sums in the past on new Formula 1 engines and we will invest again for the future. The question has never been can Cosworth invest in new engines or do we have the capability to invest in new engines. The question has been does the sport want new engines and do the customer teams want to pay for the new technologies that are coming through and how is that going to be structured? We have got, I think, great clarity now and for us the V6 engine has got a lot of people in Northampton smiling because we have very talented people who quite frankly live for the day when they can get out of bed and design new racing engines and particularly when we are taking on some of the giants of the sport. It is part of the tradition of Cosworth and long may it continue."

With the publication of the 2014 Technical Regulations, talk turned to the electric-only pitlane.

Stefano Domenicali was the first to weigh in. "I think that this is something that we have started discussing," he said. "There are different opinions on that. As you know, there are some manufacturers that are keen to go ahead with this project. Some others fear that, not from a technical point of view, just from a show point of view, it is something that we need to make sure that the sport is happy for. This is a topic that in my view, because of the situation that it is for 2014, it can still be discussed, we have the time to discuss it in a proper way. There are different opinions on this subject because on one side there is the technical aspect and on the other side there is the sport and the passion. You may say that in the pit lane, with no noise, it would be difficult for the people to perceive the passion that Formula 1 is all about. On the other side, you may say that Formula 1 has to be the pinnacle of motor sport in terms of new developments and research and so this goes in the opposite direction. I think this is something that we will discuss."

James Allison also had a comment to make. "Stefano's summed it up fairly neatly," he said. "There are technical hurdles to be cleared in order to make

it happen but nothing that's impossible, just things that make the configuration of the car change relative to what we've got today. It is a complication from a design point of view, but it's not an impossibility. From what I understand, the idea has been trailed in various groups and it largely receives a positive reaction as a useful initiative, but there are pros and cons with it from an operational point of view that we're still discussing."

Allison was also asked to weigh in on the closed cockpit proposal.

"This is something that's been under discussion for a few Technical Working Group meetings now," he explained. "We're looking to try to look after the driver's head, both from large scale things like tyres and also small scale things like the very unfortunate incident that Felipe suffered. There are a few suggestions around: one of them was looking into a fully enclosed canopy. Another one was looking into a visor-type where it's still open above the driver's head but he has a visor in front of him. And then there is a third type of proposal as well, where there isn't a see-through windscreen at all but there is like a roll (bar) structure in front of the driver that would anyway deflect any big objects.

"All those things are still in fairly early discussion and you would have seen from what the FIA proposed, published recently, that they are showing some of the very early research that's being done into the feasibility and practicality of this type of solution, but there are a lot of questions to answer before we can bring it to a practical solution," Allison continued. "The closed canopy would have an aerodynamic effect - not a bad one, it would be easier to manage the airflow around a closed canopy than an open one - but there are all sorts of other things to discuss, like egress in the event of an accident, keeping the canopy clean, for example when it might get covered in oil and the like, so each of the proposed solutions has advantages and disadvantages and we need to do the basic research to find out what is the best way forward."

Allison was essentially the star of the show, talking about new regulations, Renault's wind tunnel upgrade, and his new role as FOTA's technical chief.

Explaining his new role for FOTA, the Renault man said "it is a significant responsibility. I think everyone would agree that FOTA is a group that has acted strongly in the interests of the sport and very constructively and the technical regulation working group is one part of what FOTA does. It's a part which tries to look constructively in the medium and long term to contribute to making the rules of the sport work well, working hand in hand with the FIA to do that, and hopefully I can pick up where some of my predecessors have left off in looking after those meetings in an efficient way."

Allison admitted that the wind tunnel upgrade was a lot of work, but denied that it had cost the team on track.

"Well it is a lot of work, that's for sure," he said. "People call wind-tunnel models 'models' but they are not really models at all. They are things that cost almost as much as making a real car and almost as complicated. Just changing the model from 50 percent to 60 percent is already a large engineering exercise but in our case as well the wind tunnel working sections wasn't really quite big enough to support a 60 percent model so we needed to strip that back to its bare skeleton and replace it with something that was man enough for a 60 percent model, so all told it was a project that started around about a year ago and culminated just recently."

We lost "very little actual wind tunnel time, as one of the most precious things to all teams is to keep that tunnel running and to keep the aero development going so we made sure we could do the swap-over with the minimum amount of disruption to the actual tunnel testing," Allison continued. "We had the tunnel down for 12 days."

Norbert Haug was asked about the historical importance of the Nurburgring to the Mercedes team.

"No doubt this is not quite as Monza is for Ferrari but it is our home race, it is our second home race after Silverstone because the team is based in England, obviously," Haug said. "The Silver Arrows were born here 77 years ago, as you know, so this is a big tradition and we need to fulfil it, we know that but we cannot win on our own means at the moment, we know that, but I think the good thing is that Mercedes is present in Formula 1 and who knows... Mercedes knows that they are going to get the job done, we are going to get the job done but we are still a young team, a learning team, but we dare to be there, we dare to have the competition, we like to fight with the guys."

Haug admitted that the team was not living up to expectations at the moment.

"We're not good enough at the moment," he said, "but we have won in the past. We won six World Championships with our partners, seventy-five races out of 250 so far, so this is not such a bad score and now we are building up something new and I am very grateful that our board gave us the support and gave us the opportunity. It makes sense commercially, we are very good in that respect. We are not good enough in the points standings at the moment but believe me, we are working on it."

Finally, Monisha Kaltenborn was asked to sum up her feelings on Sauber's season thus far.

"We are quite pleased actually with this season," she said. "At the beginning of the season we set the target that we wanted to have a reliable car and fast car and regularly score points. If you look at the performance so far we have managed, with one exception until now, to at least finish the race in ranks where you can score points. We didn't quite manage that on the first race so we are very happy with our performance. We are happy with our drivers. Where we do see room to improve is on our efficiency because we could have scored more points looking at our performance so we have to work on that still.

"This season is extremely important because there has been so much development going on during the season so you really have to keep it up at each and every race event to stay within your group and catch up on the ones in front of you and I think it is especially very important in this particular season with what's been going on."

F1 Germany Blog - FP3 at the Nurburgring

Bizarrely, considering Thursday's torrents and the overall weather forecast for the weekend, all three practice sessions at the Nurburgring have taken place in the dry, with occasional slippery bits of track.

But in the dry conditions present this morning, it was same-old, same-old in Germany – Red Bull claimed the top two slots, as is traditional. Also following tradition, Mark Webber held the top slot until Sebastian Vettel bested his teammate by 0.133s seconds before the chequered flag brought an end to proceedings on track.

There were a few offs, and many drivers missed the chicane, but the only real incident of note came in the closing minutes of FP3, when Lotus man Karun Chandhok took a trip across the gravel at Turn 9, bringing out the yellows in the process.

The session ended on a sour note for HRT rookie Daniel Ricciardo, currently taking part in his second grand prix weekend as a fully-fledged race driver. While allowances must be made for his performances as he gets to know the car and the circuits, the Australian's best time of 1.37.554s would have seen the young driver fall foul of the 107 percent rule had it been a qualifying session rather than a practice run.

Ricciardo was roughly 0.3s shy of the cut-off point, which is time that can be made up, presuming Red Bull don't find an extra half-second out on track this afternoon.

But while Red Bull's dominance might be depressing to those fans hoping for a mid-season change in the standings, it is worth noting that the three fastest men of the morning were split by only 0.222s, meaning that Ferrari driver Fernando Alonso is in with a real chance of a front-row slot on Sunday.

The McLaren pair have improved since Friday; Lewis Hamilton was 0.6s down on pace-setting Vettel, while Jenson Button was in P6, 0.05s slower than his teammate. The British team need to find more single-lap pace if they hope to challenge for the front this afternoon, but given the Woking outfit's race pace, Sunday should be more interesting than Saturday promises to be.

There was little of note in the rest of the standings, with the drivers clustered in groups we're all too used to seeing: Williams, Force India, Mercedes, and Renault made up the middle of the pack, while Sauber, Toro Rosso, Lotus, Virgin, and HRT brought up the rear.

FP3 timings (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.30.916s
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.31.049s
3. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.31.138s
4. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.31.578s
5. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.31.623s
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.31.694s
7. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.32.144s
8. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.32.391s
9. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.32.523s
10. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.32.751s
11. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.32.777s
12. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.32.813s
13. Nick Heidfeld (Renault) 1.33.072s
14. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.33.179s
15. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.33.531s
16. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.33.671s
17. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.33.948s
18. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.34.125s
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.35.385s
20. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.36.724s
21. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) 1.36.804s
22. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 1.36.894s
23. Karun Chandhok (Lotus) 1.36.959s
24. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) 1.37.554s

FI Germany Blog - Q1 at the Nurburgring

As Q1 got underway in Germany, the skies were cloudy, the air was cold, but there was no sign of rain to fall in the session. Track temperatures were 22 degrees, while the air was a chilly 14 degrees.

Virgin Racing spent a long time in the pitlane, and appeared to be suffering warm-up issues. HRT radioed driver Tonio Liuzzi, telling their man to stay well back from the Virgin pair and avoid problems, unless he thought he could gain an advantage by getting a tow.

But whatever Liuzzi manages this afternoon, he is almost certain to start Sunday's race from the back of the grid. The Italian driver was forced to change gearboxes this afternoon, and has incurred a five-place grid drop penalty as a consequence. Based on the past performance of the HRTs, it is unlikely that Liuzzi will be able to qualify high enough to start the race in anything other than P24.

The bulk of the grid are running on the harder compound, but Heikki Kovalainen is currently in P15 following a lap on the softs, and some of the teams in the middle of the pack might be pressured in to using their own softs to ensure a slot in Q2. Toro Rosso are unlikely to make the move, at least where Jaime Alguersuari is concerned – the young Spaniard's best race results have come following Q1 knockouts that have left the sometime DJ with extra tyres for Sunday.

With only five minutes remaining of the session, only Kamui Kobayashi and Vitaly Petrov have yet to set timed laps. And with that, Kobayashi

crosses the line in P8, making the Sauber driver a dead cert for a spot in Q2.

The dropout zone is currently comprised of Rubens Barrichello, Timo Glock, Jerome D'Ambrosio, Tonio Liuzzi, Karun Chandhok, Daniel Ricciardo, and Petrov.

Petrov's first timed lap puts the Russian in at P5, safely into Q2. Kovalainen has taken his place in the dropout zone, which is now comprised of the six drivers from FI's newest teams, plus Barrichello.

At the top of the grid, Fernando Alonso was fastest for the bulk of the session, until Nick Heidfeld and Michael Schumacher dethroned him with minutes to go. Lewis Hamilton is sitting in P4, much more competitive than he's been all weekend. Felipe Massa has just gone fastest, and it's all change at the top in the closing moments.

The slower times on offer in Q1 – set on the harder tyre compound – mean that the 107 percent cut-off point is in the 1.38s, and no one is at risk of failing to qualify.

Kobayashi's safe lap is no longer looking quite so safe. After Barrichello saved his skin, and a number of good laps from the rest of the pack, the Japanese driver is currently sitting in the dropout zone (and in the pits), and is now certain to be knocked out with the usual six suspects.

Dropout zone

18. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus)
20. Timo Glock (Virgin)
21. Karun Chandhok (Lotus)
22. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin)
23. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT)*
24. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT)

* Liuzzi incurred a five-place grid penalty for a gearbox change; the HRT driver will start the German Grand Prix in P24.

F1 Germany Blog – Q2 at the Nurburgring

Kamui Kobayashi was the surprise scalp claimed in Q1; the Sauber driver was late to set a timed lap, and his best effort just wasn't fast enough when the times began to fall in the final minutes of the session.

As Q2 gets underway at the Nurburgring, track temperature has remained steady at 22 degrees, with the air temperature a constant 14 degrees. The levels of humidity are on the rise, but the current sunshine implies that rain is unlikely in the next 15 minutes.

With the runs on hards largely out of the way, times at the top of the sheets are tumbling – based on this session alone, the soft tyres are around 2s a lap faster than Pirelli's harder compound.

Lewis Hamilton has been top of the timesheets for much of the session, but the British driver's current position does not guarantee a similar spot in Q3. The gap between Hamilton and Sebastian Vettel in P2 is a mere 0.019s, but with both men currently in the pits and looking to stay that way, it's unlikely to will change.

The dropout zone is currently comprised of Adrian Sutil, Sergio Perez, Rubens Barrichello, Sebastien Buemi, Paul di Resta, and Jaime Alguersuari. Michael Schumacher is not safe – currently in P10, the German legend has only 0.2s on compatriot Sutil.

And with that, Schumacher has been popped firmly into the dropout zone – fast laps from di Resta and Pastor Maldonado have pushed the German driver into P12 with less than a minute remaining of the session.

But you can't keep an old fighter down, and Schumacher responds with a P8-worthy lap, although he is quickly pushed down into the P9 danger zone.

Currently at risk of dropping out are di Resta, Maldonado, Petrov, Barrichello, Perez, Buemi, and Alguersuari. Petrov then saves himself, pushing Nick Heidfeld into the dropout zone, while Schumacher is in P10 by the skin of his teeth.

With the chequered flag fallen, Schumacher is saved the indignity of dropping out in Q2 at his home race.

Dropout zone

11. Nick Heidfeld (Renault)
 12. Paul di Resta (Force India)
 13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)
 14. Rubens Barrichello (Williams)
 15. Sergio Perez (Sauber)
 16. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso)
 17. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso)
-

F1 Germany Blog - Q3 at the Nurburgring

The short and sweet final qualifying session at the Nurburgring saw more action in the opening minutes than we have been accustomed to at recent races.

By the time the session was half-run, there were times on the board from a borderline unprecedented 70 percent of the drivers. Only Michael Schumacher, Nico Rosberg, and Adrian Sutil had yet to leave the garage.

Fernando Alonso was the first man to set a timed lap, and went P1 as a consequence. But Lewis Hamilton took the top slot from his former teammate, before being dethroned by Mark Webber. Unusually, Sebastian Vettel's first timed lap was only good enough for P2. But it is worth remembering that it was here that Webber scored his first career victory - it is a track he knows and loves.

With only three minutes remaining, Sutil, Schumacher, and Rosberg are the only men out on track.

But we will be seeing multiple runs from Alonso, Webber, and Hamilton, all of whom have just left the pits with enough time to complete the in-lap and cross the line in time to set a second run before the chequered flag.

All ten men are now out on track - traffic could make the difference between the front row and row four.

Webber is currently fastest in all three sectors, so Vettel will have to push hard if he is to claim his 912th pole of the season. (I jest. A bit.)

On his second run, Webber improves and holds provisional pole. Hamilton is unable to progress beyond P2, and Vettel - surprisingly - is only able to score P3.

Provisional grid

1. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.30.079s
2. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.30.134s
3. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.30.216s
4. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.30.442s
5. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.30.910s
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.31.263s
7. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.31.288s
8. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.32.010s
9. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.32.187s
10. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.32.48s
11. Nick Heidfeld (Renault) 1.32.215s
12. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.32.560s
13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.32.635s
14. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.33.043s
15. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.33.176s
16. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.33.546s
17. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.33.698s
18. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.33.786s
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.35.599s
20. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.36.400s
21. Karun Chandhok (Lotus) 1.36.422s
22. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 1.36.641s
23. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) 1.37.036s
24. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) 1.37.011s*

* Liuzzi incurred a five-place grid penalty for a gearbox change; the HRT driver originally qualified in P23.

F1 Germany Blog - Saturday press conference at the Nurburgring

There's a new man in the central seat at the post-qualifying press conference, and that man is Mark Webber (Red Bull), who's looking pretty comfy in centre stage.

Joining him were Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) and Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull).

Webber was riding high on his back-to-back poles in the past two races.

"The performance has been getting a little bit better in the last few races and also this track seems to be not too bad for me in the past," the Australian driver said. "I must say the session went pretty well, with the exception of the first option run in Q2, well the only run in Q2. That wasn't very smooth but the other two laps were good and the boys did a great job on the car. Again, they have had some pretty late nights in the lead-up to this event, so we recovered well and we got it altogether at the end there. I was thinking on my in-lap, 'if someone gets me, they deserve it' as I couldn't have got much more out of it. It was my complete limit, but it was a pretty good lap and so it is very satisfying to see no one grabs you at the end there, as it is a bit of an anxious wait for those 30 seconds."

Hamilton was in similarly good spirits after what he described as one of his happiest laps.

"We have had some new upgrades this weekend and throughout the weekend and throughout the week a constant push to bring updates and to improve some of our engine modes, which have helped massively," the McLaren driver said. "We definitely underestimated how good the car would be when we went to light fuel, but it felt fantastic and the lap was just beautifully flowing and it was one of the happiest and most comforting laps I have ever had. It felt just incredible. We are not far from [Red Bull] so it is a good step for us."

And while Vettel's body language showed the young driver was frustrated to have broken his seemingly-endless string of front row starts, he was the consummate professional in his spoken language.

"It is not really a disappointment," Vettel said. "I would like to be a bit further up but I think it was a tough session. All in all, I think we had a very good recovery. Yesterday, I didn't really find my way, I didn't really find the balance with the car. This morning I think it was much better. Through qualifying here and there maybe we should have been a little bit quicker but, all in all, there wasn't much missing to Lewis and to Mark. A little bit here and there, but the most important thing is that I have a much better feeling for the car today and looking forward to tomorrow. I guess if it is dry we have a very good chance, but it might not be the case, so we will see."

But the disappointment of not being on pole has not knocked the fight out of the defending world champion. Far from it.

"I will fight everyone, that's what is happening when you race in Formula 1," Vettel said. "First of all there's Lewis eight metres ahead and then another eight metres further on there's Mark. That's where we are going to start and then we will see. It will be a long race, as I said, and tricky conditions but I know that you are very excited but as I said, I'm racing everyone."

Vettel also acknowledged the efforts made by his team to improve his car after a less than optimal Friday.

"As I mentioned it wasn't the easiest session or the easiest Friday we had but we had a good recovery, so this morning the car felt much better," the German driver said. "It wasn't just one change that we made. Obviously we tried many things in free practice so we went back a couple of steps in one way and then obviously changed some small tweaks here and there which all in all made the balance much better and I was much happier this morning."

"This afternoon, I think it was a tight session, there wasn't much missing," he continued. "In Q3 I think I had two solid runs, maybe lost out a little bit in the last sector on my last attempt but all in all I think Mark was very quick. He did a very good lap today and it would have been very close. I'm happy with third, it's on the clean side of the track. We will see whether that's worth an advantage or not. It depends on the conditions tomorrow. I think rain is on the way, the question is where and when it will hit the circuit. So all in all, I think we are in a much better shape than yesterday, also regarding race pace so I'm looking forward to the race tomorrow."

Hamilton was reminded that in the run-up to the race weekend, he'd told the world's media that he didn't expect to be challenging for pole this weekend.

"Just as I was sitting in the car before Q3 I was thinking I might be having to eat my words, but I would still do that," he joked. "For us, we really honestly never thought we would be anywhere near this place. I don't know what happened with Jenson [Button]. We were struggling with overall downforce grip compared to the others. I don't know if it was switching tyres on but what was important was that, even though we weren't the fastest, we kept on trying to dial the car in and improve it and find little bits here and there and we did. We made some changes. The car felt fantastic. It really, really felt fantastic. It is the most exciting and fun part of the weekend, so I was massively excited and positive going in to it. But as soon as I saw we were competitive with the guys at the front it felt great. I would say it is definitely my best qualifying session I can remember having, at least this year. My first Q3 lap was fantastic and then my last lap was even better by quite a bit, so when I came across the line it felt massively satisfying."

And the British driver is confident his race pace will be better than it was at Silverstone two weeks ago.

"At Silverstone we really struggled quite a lot with the rule changes – they massively affected us: corner entry, stability, all those kind of things," Hamilton said. "All the downforce and grip we had and everything we have developed had gone out of the window pretty much. So we were just on the back foot, there was nothing we could do, but coming back into this weekend, with the rules again made it much better. It doesn't look like it's massively affected the two Ferraris and the Red Bulls but for us it's enabled us to get back in the fight so that feels great."

Webber is another man who is confident in his race pace.

"We should be cool," the Australian driver said. "Yesterday worked out okay for us. We always know on Sunday night. You have a better indication because we saw with the McLarens that sometimes they are a bit up and down with race pace compared to where normally they are strong. We saw in Valencia they weren't so strong and a few races here and there so let's see who has the smoothest race tomorrow. We might have a few decisions to make from the cockpit as well with the mountains being a bit wet so we will see."

Given the cold temperatures we've seen all weekend, tyre performance was high on the agenda.

Getting the tyres into their optimum operating window is "something we always look at, you know that," Webber said. "Other teams are looking at it, it's a very important factor to get right. In the end I think you saw most people do one timed lap, so the tyre was ready for one lap. As always, it takes some attention and detail to work on it. When you're at the front with these guys obviously everyone's looking at that. We worked on it and it's slightly different from other venues this weekend."

"Obviously we all did our work yesterday, conditions were good, it was a dry day and we can get good information," he continued. "Generally we have an idea, within reason. We know seven out of ten – confident – how the race will unfold for us in terms of tyre wear and pit stops but you're right in your question. It's certainly not Turkey or Barcelona. The tyres look a little bit happier here. We will definitely do two – maybe six – so it's between those two. You can one-stop if you want... The tyres are a bit different here. It's the same for everybody actually."

One of the more interesting exchanges concerned the run-up to the first corner; I have copied it in full below.

Q. The run-in to the first corner is 240 meters shorter than the last time we were here. The first corner normally means trouble. With a shorter run-in to the first corner is it more difficult, is it easier to have a collision?

MW: I don't think it makes much difference on the apex. Obviously it's a tight corner, you go down there, do your best. Braking point is a bit later, obviously, because you arrive a bit slower.

SV: As long as the KERS works it's fine. If it doesn't work then it can be painful. Maybe it's a bit shorter this year, but I don't think it makes a massive difference.

Finally, Webber spoke of his confidence in the team.

"We've had a few incidents, obviously, which have been played in public, which is never ideal for us as a team," Webber acknowledged. "We're here to race, we're here to win, the team's come a long way. Sometimes we learn in not a good way, sometimes we learn in a good way which is behind closed doors. I feel OK in the team. Dietrich is very good, all the guys on the floor, Christian and Adrian doing their stuff. I do my job, turn up and try to concentrate on purple sectors and that's all I can do."

F1 Germany Blog - Buemi's qualifying lap excluded from results

Sebastien Buemi's P16 qualifying lap has been excluded from the afternoon's results. A fuel sample taken from the Toro Rosso driver's car failed the FIA's technical inspection.

The FIA statement reads: "The stewards, having received a report from the FIA Technical Delegate that the fuel sample taken after Qualifying from Car 18 showed an increase in one given GC (gas chromatography) Peak Area of an absolute amount greater than 0.1 per cent for the component present at a concentration below 0.8 per cent, and having heard from the FIA Formula One Analytical Chemist and the Team Representatives and examined the fuel test graphs, determine this to be a breach of Article 19.8.3 of the 2011 FIA Formula One Technical Regulations and decide to impose a penalty of exclusion of Car 18 from the results of Qualifying."

At the Canadian Grand Prix, Shell invited me on a tour of their fuel research laboratory, which travels from race to race. In my report of the tour, I covered the FIA's strict rules on fuel samples:

"Prior to each race, teams must supply the FIA with samples of the fuel they intend to use that weekend. Each sample has its own fingerprint. Peaks and troughs on a graph show the presence of different metals and compounds, and those levels cannot change. If a post-race fuel sample doesn't have the FIA-approved fingerprint, disqualification ensues.

"And it's all too easy for a fingerprint to change. Should an engine part need replacing, the new component can carry with it trace amounts of grease and dust that will alter the make-up, rendering the fuel illegal."

Buemi's problem is exactly that - following his fuel pressure problems on Friday, the Swiss driver's fuel sample no longer matched the fingerprint Toro Rosso submitted to the FIA at the start of the race weekend.

A statement from the team explains: "During Friday's F1, Buemi's car had a fuel pressure problem, which then got worse at the start of FP2 which is why he did not do a timed lap in that session," Toro Rosso said in a statement on Saturday evening. After FP2 the entire fuel system on his car was changed. When the fuel sample was taken from his car after qualifying, it did not match the one provided to the FIA prior to the start of the season. The team believes that some part of the new fuel system contained a chemical that contaminated the fuel and caused the non-conformity."

As a result of the disallowed qualifying time, Buemi will start tomorrow's race from P24.

Buemi's issue is good news for Tonio Liuzzi, who will no longer suffer the effects of a five-place grid drop he was given as a penalty for an early gearbox change. The Italian driver originally qualified in P23 and was demoted to P24, but Buemi's penalty means that Liuzzi will now be lining up in P23 on tomorrow's grid.

F1 Germany Blog - The post-qualifying analysis

So Mark Webber has got his groove back. On the face of it, it looks as though the Australian's issues with the Pirelli tyres apply only to warm weather - in the cold of Silverstone and the Nurburgring, the Red Bull driver has scored back-to-back poles, bringing an end to Sebastian Vettel's Saturday dominance.

Of course, P1 on Saturday is one thing, P1 on Sunday afternoon is another matter entirely. And with Vettel, Lewis Hamilton, and Fernando Alonso all nipping at his heels, Webber is going to have to make his best start of the season thus far if he is to have any hope of holding on to the lead.

While Saturday's result may appear to be more of the same, what with a Red Bull in P1 for the eleventh time this season, it's really not.

First, Webber has shown that his Silverstone pole was not a one-off - rumours of the Australian's death have been greatly exaggerated, and he is more than capable of beating his teammate's pace over a single lap on occasion.

Second, Webber was not the only man to beat Vettel - Hamilton's P2 means that Vettel will be starting from the second row for the first time in

fifteen races. It's not just the RB7 that's capable of beating the RB7 on a Saturday afternoon; despite their fears to the contrary, McLaren also have the necessary pace.

Presuming that today's results are not a one-off, we should be in for a more interesting set of Saturdays in the second half of the season: the split between Webber in P1 and Vettel in P3 was 0.137s.

But qualifying is about much more than the first two rows of the grid.

While Hamilton is sitting pretty on the front row, teammate Jenson Button struggled for grip. As a result, the 2009 world champion will be starting from P7, beleaguered with a choice of set-up that didn't pay dividends on Saturday. The odds of that set-up working wonders on Sunday are quite slim, but Button's Montreal win proves that only a fool would discount him, no matter how long the odds.

The level of competition in the middle of the pack appears to be nearly as tight as it is at the front. With both Renault drivers in Q3 (or very close to it), it looks as though the Enstone team will be in the position to challenge Mercedes for P4 in the constructors' standings – the German team's weekend has not been as good as hoped thus far. Both teams look to be fairly similar on race pace, but the potential fly in the ointment is Force India, thanks to Adrian Sutil's P8.

Kamui Kobayashi could be a dark horse to watch out for on Sunday. Sauber gambled on a one-lap run in Q1, but Kobayashi's single lap saw the Japanese driver hit traffic, and he was out when the chequered flag fell. While P18 is not the result the team were hoping for, the extra sets of fresh rubber should pay dividends in the race, as has been the case all season.

Without sounding like a broken record, the main thing to take away from qualifying at the German Grand Prix is that the competition at the front of the pack is the tightest it's been all season. In those conditions, it's the fans who are the real winners. The more drivers we have on similar pace, the better the overall standard of racing.

Tonio Liuzzi's qualifying time was good enough for P23, but it was announced before the session started that the HRT driver had been issued with a five-place grid penalty as the result of a gearbox change.

It should also be noted that Sebastien Buemi has been excluded from the qualifying results following an irregularity with a fuel sample taken from his car after the session. The Swiss driver will now start the German Grand Prix from the back of the grid, promoting Liuzzi back up to P23.

Qualifying times (without penalties)

1. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.30.079s
2. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.30.134s
3. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.30.216s
4. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.30.442s
5. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.30.910s
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.31.263s
7. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.31.288s
8. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.32.010s
9. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.32.187s
10. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.32.48s
11. Nick Heidfeld (Renault) 1.32.215s
12. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.32.560s
13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.32.635s
14. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.33.043s
15. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.33.176s
16. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.33.546s
17. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.33.698s
18. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.33.786s
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.35.599s
20. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.36.400s
21. Karun Chandhok (Lotus) 1.36.422s
22. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 1.36.641s
23. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) 1.37.01s
24. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) 1.37.036s

F1 Germany Blog - The German Grand Prix as it happened

As the paddock prepared for the German Grand Prix at the Nurburgring, weather conditions were changeable. If changeable counts when it goes from raining to grey and damp and then back again on an infinite loop, anyway.

As the lights went out, track temperature was 15 degrees, while the air temperature was 13 degrees. Contrary to expectations, there was no Safety Car start.

And they're off! Hamilton gets past Webber at the start, while Alonso gets past Vettel. The German driver flat-spotted his tyre under braking, and the Spaniard took advantage and slipped past up the inside.

Turn 3 proved to be tricky for Heidfeld and di Resta, both of whom span and wound up towards the back of the pack.

Alonso and Vettel are nose to tail, fighting for P3, while Hamilton has pulled out 1.2s on Webber in the first lap. Alonso is 0.5s behind Webber, with Vettel 0.4s further back.

Button appeared to have a poor start; by the second lap he was in P10, behind Schumacher and Petrov.

Kobayashi is up to P12 by lap 2; the Japanese driver started in P17.

Three laps in to the race and the order is Hamilton, Webber, Vettel, Alonso, Rosberg, Massa, Sutil, Schumacher, Petrov, Button. Vettel reclaimed P3 from Alonso when the Ferrari driver ran wide into the run-off area, gifting the position to the defending champion.

Massa has just been told that if he doesn't get past Rosberg – 0.3s ahead – it will ruin his race. He needs to get past now.

The gap between Webber and Hamilton is currently holding steady at 1.8s. But on lap 5, Webber found extra pace and pulled 0.6s back on the McLaren driver.

On lap 6, Alonso was in an ideal position to pull off a DRS-enabled overtake on Vettel, but the move never came. The next few laps should see some interesting dicing between the pair.

The four fastest men have a 5.1s advantage on the rest of the pack – Rosberg is slowing down Massa, who currently appears to have more pace than the German driver.

Lap 8, and Alonso gets past Vettel for P3 going in to Turn 1.

Button, still languishing in P10, is hot on the heels of Petrov in P9, and within the DRS zone. The gap between the two drivers is less than half a second. Kobayashi is half a second behind Button, and closing fast. We should be in for a three-way battle for ninth.

Webber is steadily eating away at Hamilton's lead – by lap 10, the gap between the two had been reduced to 0.7s. This fight – when it happens –

Vettel had a nasty spin into the run-off area at Turn 10 on lap 10, losing a lot of ground to the men in front but holding P4. Rosberg is now less than half a second behind, and the Red Bull driver will almost certainly need to pit for fresh rubber if the flat spots are any indication.

Lap 11 and Heidfeld is out of the race. The Renault driver was catapulted across the gravel following a collision with Buemi in the approach to Turn 13. Ironically, race control chose that moment to issue Heidfeld with a drive-through penalty for causing a lap 1 collision...

The Buemi-Heidfeld incident will be investigated by the stewards.

Hamilton has been asked to extend his first stint and look after his tyres, and Webber chooses that moment to attack.

Lap 13 wheel-to-wheel action between Hamilton and Webber, who pass and repass each other along the main straight. Alonso is closing up behind rapidly, and could be ideally placed to take advantage of his distracted rivals.

Hamilton has held the lead for the moment.

Hamilton, Webber, and Alonso are split by less than a second. The three drivers arrive on the main straight simultaneously, with Alonso trying to slip past Webber as Hamilton extends the minutest of leads. All three are within the DRS zone, and each man is vulnerable.

Webber flat-spotted his tyres at the beginning of lap 14. Hamilton has been asked to look after his rubber, and Alonso was on the team radio complaining of tyre wear. No one can afford to pit and cede advantage.

Except Webber does, handing P2 to Alonso and returning to the track in P6.

Lap 16, and Alonso is 1.2s behind Hamilton; if the British driver can maintain this gap, Alonso's DRS is useless.

Further down the pack, Button managed to get past Petrov at some point, but the Russian driver reclaims the position.

Hamilton and Alonso pit on lap 17; the British driver wins the race out of the pits, but arrives back on track in the middle of a Massa-Webber battle that spills over into the pitlane exit.

Current order is Massa, Webber, Hamilton, Alonso, Sutil, Button, Petrov, Kobayashi, Vettel, and Rosberg. I assume that both Vettel and Rosberg pitted without me noticing – this race is too action-packed to keep perfect track of while typing.

Massa pits, handing the lead back to Webber, just as spots of rain start to appear on the on-board cameras. The Brazilian driver rejoins the action in P8.

The Buemi-Heidfeld incident will be investigated after the race.

Lap 20, and Hamilton sets the fastest lap of the race. He is less than a second behind race leader Webber, meaning the DRS can come into play and shake up the action.

Webber responds with a fastest lap of his own, pulling out a lead of 1.08s that puts Hamilton's DRS out of reach.

Barrichello has retired, but I missed both cause and occasion. We're not on lap 22, and it appears to have happened at some point on lap 19. It looks to

have been some form of mechanical failure, given the sector times on his last lap. According to reports online, it was an oil leak.

Lap 23, and Sutil pits from P4, promoting Button to that position. There was a scary moment for the brains on the Mercedes pitwall, as Schumacher and Rosberg nearly came to blows, but the younger driver held position.

One lap later, and Schumacher span at Turn 10. He was able to stay in the race, but dropped down to P11.

By lap 24, Button is the only man in the top ten still running on his first set of tyres. The McLaren driver's current P4 is somewhat artificial as a consequence – the next round of stops should give a more accurate sense of position.

At the head of the pack, Hamilton is 1.4s behind Webber, while Alonso is 1.6s behind the Brit. Vettel is back in P5; he was promoted to that position by Button's lap 25 pitstop. Button rejoins the action in P8, between Sutil and Schumacher.

Lap 26, and Alonso goes purple. Vettel is told of a rear break problem, and is asked to move the bias forward, but there are questions in the press room – is the problem genuine, or is the team giving him an easy explanation for his poor race performance? The German Grand Prix is giving ammunition to those critics of Vettel who say the defending world champion is only able to deliver lights to flag wins.

Hamilton has reduced the gap to Webber to that magic second that makes the DRS possible; Alonso is 1.6s further behind.

All drivers have now pitted; the top ten on lap 27 is: Webber, Hamilton, Alonso, Massa, Vettel, Rosberg, Sutil, Button, Schumacher, Kobayashi.

Lap 29, and Alonso is told of a problem with the tyres. He is then told to start closing now, so it would seem that the radio message was in fact about a problem with Hamilton's tyres, although the British driver's constant pace would appear to belie that.

Of course, the problem could be with Webber's tyres – the Australian was the first to pit, and Hamilton has reduced the gap to the front from 1.6s to 0.8s over the past three laps.

And it was – Webber pits on lap 31, and rejoins in P3. Hamilton is now leading the race, with Alonso hot on his heels 0.6s further down the track.

Nasty sideways sp8ns along the gravel for Chandhok, who came off at Turn 9.

Hamilton pits a lap later, and comes out in P2. To be accurate, he comes out alongside Webber and the pair have a wheel-to-wheel battle that the British driver eventually wins. If you can call it winning when the gap is less than half a second, anyway.

Alonso pits from the lead and holds it, but Hamilton and Webber are approaching up the straight as Alonso exits the pits, and the British driver manages to take advantage of the Ferrari driver's cold tyres to slip past for the lead.

By lap 34, Hamilton has 2.4s on Alonso. Webber is 1.6s further back. But Webber loses time when he misses the chicane, possibly inviting a penalty for having all four wheels outside the white lines.

Lap 35, and Button makes it past Rosberg for P6. Moments later, he is called to box by the team, who have spotted a hydraulics issue with his car. The British driver has retired for the second race in a row.

Massa has been sitting pretty in P4 for quite some time now, but the main thing he appears to be achieving is slowing down the chasing pack, allowing Hamilton, Alonso, and Webber to pull out a lead that had reached 15.4s by lap 40.

Lap 41 and Vettel pits for the second time, holding P5. Massa pits from P4 a lap later, and also manages to hold position, emerging on track right in the German's crosshairs. Vettel's warmer tyres should give the German an advantage, but with rear brake problems it would take a brave man to attempt to out-brake his rival and risk losing everything.

Lap 43 and Vettel misses the chicane. But he didn't gain advantage as a result, so action from the stewards is unlikely.

Vettel is told that his rear brakes are now okay, and the forward bias can be reversed.

By lap 44, Hamilton has extended the lead over Alonso to 3.2s. But Alonso is told that he has gained 0.2s on the Brit, and is asked to stay out as long as possible, as the McLaren driver appears to be pushing for a long stint.

With only 15 laps remaining, the pack still needs to run on the prime compound, and it's entirely possible we could see a rash of stops on lap 59.

Turns out Liuzzi retired on lap 41, but it escaped my notice, I'm afraid.

Alonso has pulled back 0.1s on Hamilton.

Lap 47, and Schumacher passes Petrov for P9 after a long-winded battle that saw the Russian miss the chicane and rejoin the track in his original position. Schumacher was within the DRS zone as the pair approached the main straight, but waited until Turn 1 to pass the Renault driver.

By lap 50, the action on track had calmed down (although there was a bit of a battle between Massa and Hamilton).

Hamilton pitted for his final stint on the hard tyres lap 52, handing the lead to Alonso, who also needs to pit for the primes. The British driver emerged in P3, with both men ahead also needing to stop for the primes in the next few laps.

Ferrari were ready in the pits, but have elected to keep Alonso out on track for as long as possible in the hopes of overtaking Webber once the final

round of stops is complete. The Ferrari struggles on the hard compound, and the cold weather will only make that worse, meaning that Webber could pip the Spaniard to the second step of the podium.

Hamilton looks to be in good shape for the win, as both of the men ahead of him have one more stop to complete.

Alonso pits on lap 54, and comes back out on track behind Hamilton. Current race leader Webber still needs to pit, and the race is now Hamilton's to lose.

Vettel, who is currently running in P5, will not be on the podium at his home grand prix. And, for the first time this season, we journalists don't need to think of new questions to ask him in the post-race press conference. He'll be sad to lose the points on his press conference loyalty card, that's for sure. Ten appearances and you get a free juice. (Not really. You get TWO free juices.)

Lap 57 and Webber pits from the lead, handing the win to Hamilton – who, let's be honest, has been in line for the obvious win for the last 25 percent of the race. Webber comes out in P3, behind Alonso.

Hamilton has 3.4s on Alonso in the race to the chequered flag, and given the Ferrari's hard tyre struggles, that gap could be extended further still. There are only three laps remaining.

Lap 59, and several drivers still need to pit for the hard tyre. It looks as though both Vettel and Massa will be pitting on the final lap – the two men are split by 0.3s.

It's the last lap, and Vettel and Massa pit together, This is a race of crews, not drivers. And Red Bull win it, meaning that Vettel will finish in P4.

German Grand Prix results

1. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren)
2. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
3. Mark Webber (Red Bull)
4. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)
5. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
6. Adrian Sutil (Force India)
7. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) + 1 lap
8. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) + 1 lap
9. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) + 1 lap
10. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) + 1 lap
11. Sergio Perez (Sauber) + 1 lap
12. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) + 1 lap
13. Paul di Resta (Force India) + 1 lap
14. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) + 1 lap
15. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) + 1 lap
16. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) + 2 laps
17. Timo Glock (Virgin) + 3 lap
18. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) + 3 lap
19. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) + 3 lap
20. Karun Chandhok (Lotus) + 4 laps

Tonio Liuzzi RET
Jenson Button RET
Rubens Barrichello RET
Nick Heidfeld RET

F1 Germany Blog - Sunday press conference at the Nurburgring

It was a strange press conference at the Nurburgring on Sunday – for the first time this season, Sebastian Vettel was not present. Facing the world's media in his place were Lewis Hamilton (McLaren), Fernando Alonso (Ferrari), and Mark Webber (Red Bull).

With four winners in four races, and no Vettel, the main topic of conversation was the increasingly competitive F1 season, and the perception of a reduced gap between Red Bull and the competition.

Asked whether he thought the gap had now been closed, Hamilton said “It appears so but like I say, we didn't really think we would be so fast and not quite sure what we've done, because we've not really brought much here. I don't know if it's the conditions.

“I think we were competitive in Montreal and in Monaco and in Valencia, in hot temperatures, we are less competitive,” the British driver continued. “We obviously went to Silverstone with the rule changes – which was a big problem for us – and then we come back here to where we were, really, in cool conditions. I think we're there or thereabouts but I do still feel that the overall performance of the two guys here, particularly the Red Bulls', is slightly better than ours. You can see this weekend, I was quickest in the first sector and the last sector, but we lose a lot in the middle sector, and that's because we don't have a DRS system as efficient as theirs, so I think that we will lose at least half of those four tenths in the middle sector. If we can improve in that area, then I think we could definitely eke ahead of them, so that's what we need to work on.”

Alonso was equally unwilling to commit himself.

"I think that as Lewis said, it seems that one weekend is good for us in terms of Silverstone, the characteristics of the corners or whatever," he said. "This weekend seems good for McLaren, for whatever reason, but Red Bull is always there. It seems that all conditions on most circuits are good for them, so that's the only difference and I think we need to make another step if we want to be at the same level."

Webber, on the other hand, was critical of the RB7's race pace, which the Australian driver sees as the team's Achilles heel.

"I don't think I could have got much more," the Red Bull driver said. "I think I drove to the limit of the car. All of us did. Lewis deserved the win. Fernando, all of us, were pushing hard for the majority of the grand prix and it comes down to the team-work in the pit-stops and everything together. In the end disappointed not to win of course, but we will keep pushing for Budapest. We know we have to improve the car on Sundays. It's an area that has been brewing the last few races and it is something that we need to try to address soon."

Asked to provide further detail, Webber explained: "It has been like it for the past two-and-a-half years. The car has been very, very quick on Saturday and normally enough on Sundays to win grands prix. Obviously, the last two we have been done fair-and-square. Seb last weekend, me this weekend, so we didn't really have much to punch back with. So hats off to the opposition. That's what it's about but it is good that we have only got four days and we are in Budapest again to try and have another crack."

But with the next race at the Hungaroring, a track that is widely held to be best-suited to Red Bull, talk turned to the developments Ferrari and McLaren would be bringing to negate their opponents' advantage.

"I'm not quite sure what we have coming," Hamilton said. "I think the car stays the same although, again, I will inevitably go back and speak to my engineers now and we will do an assessment as to how things were during the race and I will tell them exactly where we can be better and I will push them in every direction possible to hopefully see what we can get. Anything that we may have coming in the future again, I'm certain my team is pushing very hard to try and bring forward. There are things that we really, really need so we need to put every little bit of resource and effort into that."

"In three days time we are in Budapest so the cars will be identical to what we have raced here," Alonso added. "I know that there are some parts that we tested on Friday but they were not positive so maybe they check it again in Budapest but the car will be quite similar. The biggest difference or the most significant difference for the car performance and behaviour will be the tyres with the soft and supersoft. The car should work differently for all the teams and we need to adjust the car in a way to exploit the grip from the tyres."

For Ferrari, it really does all come down to the tyres this season. Cold weather causes problems for the team, as their 2011 challenger is light on its rubber. Great for degradation, but bad for initial grip in the warm-up phase.

"I am looking forward [to Budapest]," Alonso said. "With a little bit more temperature in the track it will be a help for us. Soft and super soft tyres for next week should be an advantage also for us in the way we take care of our tyres. So, in one week I am sure that we will have a very interesting race again. McLaren did a step forward and is ready to take victories. Red Bull will be extremely strong in Budapest as we saw last year, so it is challenging for us but we are looking forward."

Ferrari's other problem, Alonso said, is in qualifying.

"I think qualifying was one of the important things that we missed this weekend, because on race pace we were quite quick, or as quick as the leader normally in all parts of the race, all parts of the stints," the Spanish driver explained. "If you start in fourth, you always have to overtake people, either in the pit stops, where you have to anticipate and try to overtake or stay out longer, or overtake on the track. You are always running behind traffic, so you damage your tyres a little bit more when you are running a second behind another car, so in general I think with a clean race from the front, with clean air, I think we would have a little bit more pace, which we didn't maximise today. So I think qualifying is one thing that we maybe missed this weekend and then secondly maybe also some of the moments in the race, in the pit stops, when we were very close to overtaking them, especially the second pit stop when I was first in the first corner and I lost the position in the second and in one lap I think I lost two seconds so the warm-up on the out lap was very, very bad, so that's something that we need to keep working on."

There were a number of leading questions designed to get those men present to criticise championship-leader Vettel, but none of the drivers took the bait.

"You can't expect him to be perfect all the time," Hamilton said. "He's won a huge amount of races from the end of last year into this year. It's easy for everyone to criticise him, just from one race, but he's been exceptionally consistent for a long time. For whatever reasons, I'm sure he will bounce back, he will be very quick at the next race and I think it's maybe a one-off."

Alonso agreed, and denied that Vettel's bad weekend was the result of feeling pressure.

"No, I don't think so. I think it's just about racing; whatever happens I don't know what happened to him. I think he spun at the beginning of the race. I don't know how he was stuck behind Felipe, whether he lost position in a pit stop or whatever but these things happen."

"For sure if you start from pole position, you have a second advantage in your car and you lead the whole race, it's very easy," the Ferrari driver continued. "When there is more competition, you need to take races in a different way, you need to be perfect in all things: the start, the pit stops, qualifying etc and maybe today they had some difficulties in one of the areas but I think they are still very, very quick. They were on pole position yesterday, they are by far the favourites for Budapest so after this race it still doesn't change anything compared to yesterday. For sure, as I said, if we have a small chance to recover the gap in the championship, if we do races like today, we are on the podium and he isn't. To have that combination in our case, we need the best possible performance from our teammates, as I said yesterday, in my case, we need the best McLaren performance as well, to see the McLarens very, very strong and taking points from Red Bull."

The highlight of the race, for Hamilton, was the vindication of his often criticised driving style.

"I think days like this definitely pay off more than you could imagine," the British driver said, "and being able to have close races – this was a great race in the sense that there was Mark, me and Fernando all within a tenth of each other, lap after lap after lap and it was about real perfection and it was about really not making mistakes. It was awesome and I think both of these guys drove exceptionally well. And then for me, with my aggressive style, people comment about being able to use it. I think today I was in a really very good head space and perhaps I feel even better because I felt the moves I did were some of the most precise moves I have pulled in a while. Being able to drive with your head all the time and get it right, just right, is massively satisfying. As I said, I will continue to do it the way I do it and continue to improve."

F1 Germany Blog - Analysing the German Grand Prix

Take heart, race fans. The season's about to get a little more interesting. And it was far from dull to start with.

While many people were getting a bit of Vettel victory fatigue, the repeated wins from pole did not result from processional races. Valencia excepted, naturally. We might have seen millions of lights-to-flag wins from the current world champion so far this season, but we've also been treated with racing behind the RB7.

Even better, we've had variety on the podium. Sure, Sebastian Vettel has what looks like an unassailable lead in the drivers' championship. But the past four races have seen four different victors from three teams.

And it is McLaren, not Red Bull, that has won two of the past four races.

For three of the past four races, we have seen McLaren and Ferrari overalls on the top step of the podium. At the German Grand Prix, Vettel didn't even make it to the post-race press conference.

While we could be looking at a temporary blip – everyone's allowed to have the occasional off-weekend, and there's no point writing obituaries for a driver who's just suffered a season-worst result of P4 – there's a very good chance we could be looking at a similar mid-season turnaround to the one we saw in the summer of 2009.

Red Bull have a fast car, and two fast drivers. But having taken some time to get up to speed with the Pirelli tyres, Mark Webber is now in a position to challenge his teammate for pole on Saturdays. If the Australian driver can start converting those poles into wins, he will be in a position to eat away at Vettel's WDC lead while giving his team constructors' points.

Then you have Fernando Alonso and Lewis Hamilton, both of whom were faster than Red Bull when it came to race pace on Sunday. That is particularly impressive in Alonso's case, when you consider that the cold temperatures on offer all weekend hindered the Ferrari more than any other car when it came to getting the tyres up to optimum working temperature. Challenging as that was on the options, it was near-impossible on the primes.

But Webber himself admitted, in the post-race press conference, that Red Bull's Achilles' heel.

"I don't think I could have got much more," the Red Bull driver said. "I think I drove to the limit of the car. All of us did. Lewis deserved the win. Fernando, all of us, were pushing hard for the majority of the grand prix and it comes down to the team-work in the pit-stops and everything together. In the end disappointed not to win of course, but we will keep pushing for Budapest. We know we have to improve the car on Sundays. It's an area that has been brewing the last few races and it is something that we need to try to address soon.

"It has been like it for the past two-and-a-half years," he continued. "The car has been very, very quick on Saturday and normally enough on Sundays to win grands prix. Obviously, the last two we have been done fair-and-square. Seb last weekend, me this weekend, so we didn't really have much to punch back with."

With McLaren and Ferrari on the up, and a challenger within Red Bull, Sebastian Vettel might find himself in a similar position to Jenson Button in 2009 – spending the second half of the season defending a championship lead widely thought to be unassailable.

There's no denying that the RB7 is fast, or that Vettel has complete mastery of the car when leading from the front of the pack. But Hamilton's near-perfect weekend, and Alonso's impressive race pace, will be making the current world champion a little nervous – Vettel might be fighting from a strong position, but he'll be fighting nonetheless.
