



F1 Monza Blog – Where are all the Tifosi?

I am very disappointed. This is my first Italian Grand Prix, as either a fan or a member of the press, and I have yet to see the tide of red everyone associates with Monza.

Sure, it's only Thursday. And yes, there were some die-hard fans scattered along the route to the VIP carpark, hoping to spot a glimpse of their racing heroes. But there are die-hard fans at every circuit. Based on the living legend of the Tifosi I was expecting swarms of people in full-body tattoos designed to make them look like the F10, painted faces, and chaos. Instead, all is calm in the park.

For now. When the action begins in earnest tomorrow, the grandstand opposite the press room will be heaving with people, many of them here to root, root, root for the home team. Archive footage of '60s and '70s races at Monza shows fans sitting in the trees and climbing up the grandstands for a better view of their heroes. The modern fans are no less passionate.

The lack of Tifosi (so far) has not been the only surprise of the day – the Autodromo Nazionale di Monza is a very different beast to the circuit I was expecting. First and foremost, the track has the best facilities of any of the classic circuits I've been to. The marble-floored press room is huge, and seats over 500 journalists.

But where at Silverstone and Spa you're knocking elbows with your neighbour, Monza is spacious. Best of all, at Monza you can actually see part of the track from the press room. This shouldn't be a bonus, but it is – the bulk of modern circuits have been designed in such a way that the media can only see the racing on telly, even when it's happening below our feet.

The downside to all this swish modernity is the cost – internet access for the weekend costs 120 euros. Multiply that by around 500 journalists (the photographers are elsewhere) and it's a pretty tidy profit. For the non-journalist, think of it like this: a trip to Monza as a member of the press costs about the same as a fan's racing holiday, with WiFi costing not much less than a three-day general admission ticket. Ouch! The majority of circuits charge journalists for internet access, but Monza is the most expensive by far.

Getting to the circuit is also a bit of a headache. There are serious road works along the route from Milan to Monza, and the tailbacks are huge. Apparently the roadworks have been in situ, in exactly the same place, for at least the past three grands prix. But average travel time from Milan Malpensa airport to the press room is clocking in at two hours, extreme for a journey of around 30km.

There's not been much action to report on yet, although the first press conference of the weekend has already taken place. As usual, much of it was devoted to the standard platitudes and PR statements we know and love. But Fernando Alonso deserves some recognition for his adroit fielding of the press corps' questions – everyone was pushing the Spanish driver to talk about yesterday's WMSC hearing in the hopes of getting a headline-friendly reaction, but he handled them with panache. No drama, no emotion, and not much of a story. Well handled from his and Ferrari's point of view, disappointing for anyone who wanted to file some dramatic copy this evening.

Some general paddock observations that have amused me...

- Scuderia Ferrari use Henry hoovers. I think it's because they're the right shade of red.
- Someone at Ferrari (or several someones) really likes Rose's Lime Cordial. The team had seven bottles of the stuff in Spa, and yet more here.
- F1 employees (all teams) eat ice-cream non-stop. In the rain in Spa and Montreal, in the sun in Monza and Valencia, and elsewhere in other

conditions besides. Kimi Raikkonen's Cornetto habit was nothing compared to the standard levels of race weekend ice-cream consumption.

- Virgin Racing probably shouldn't have gone for white transport trucks. Their poor truckies are out with the polish every 30 seconds, ensuring that all is mother-in-law clean at all times.
- Paddock visitors with VIP passes are 10x more likely to stand on the lower deck of the Red Bull Energy Station than anywhere else in the paddock. They are usually so excited to be there, taking pictures, that they fail to notice Mark Webber or Sebastian Vettel walking in.
- The photographers' room appears to be a converted toilet block. It might not be, but it looks an awful lot like a public convenience...

F1 Monza Blog – F1 in sunny Italy

There is something quite fitting about waving goodbye to summer with the combination of Monza and Spa, two verdant race tracks that show the leaves changing colour as the cars pass by.

For while the Italian Grand Prix still bears the hallmarks of summer, with its hot lazy days and sun-baked grass, there is a definite chill in the air as night falls. Autumn is on its way, make no mistake.

While Friday practice sessions are all about perfecting the set-up for the weekend's racing, the big question in the paddock today is to F-duct or not to F-duct. Williams' Sam Michaelis called the decision a no-brainer, thanks to Monza's long straights, while McLaren's Paddy Lowe was undecided.

As ever, teams will spend the day running a variety of set-ups until they find the one that works for this circuit.

If the rest of the weekend continues as Friday morning began – and Fernando Alonso knows all too well that a good Friday does not an excellent weekend make – then the fight for pole on Saturday is likely to be a straight fight between McLaren and Red Bull.

Both Jenson Button and Sebastian Vettel have something to prove this weekend; thanks to their collision in Spa neither man finished the race in the points. Button and Vettel were the two at the top of the practice times for the bulk of F1, and a continuation of their current form would see both drivers reassert their claim to fight for the drivers' title.

Lewis Hamilton has yet to find the sweet spot in his car that his teammate found on his first flying lap. The young Brit is only a few tenths behind the current world champion, but despite a concerted effort on-track he was consistently slower than Button in the first and second sectors.

Ferrari driver Fernando Alonso is also a man on a mission this weekend. The Spanish double champion was the third of the five serious title challengers not to score points in Spa, so like Vettel and Button he must do well this weekend to keep his championship hopes alive. But there is more on the line for Alonso than just the championship – this is his first race for Ferrari on home soil, and the Spaniard will be feeling the pressure to deliver the goods to the ever-loyal tifosi.

It could be an uphill struggle for Alonso. There is no doubt that Ferrari have seen a dramatic upturn in performance in recent months, and the Spanish driver does not lack the necessary skill to deliver the goods. But Monza is a circuit that suits the two McLarens, and every circuit seems to suit the RB6. Further complicating matters for Alonso is dark horse Robert Kubica, who outdrives his car at every opportunity and excels at low-downforce circuits such as this.

Kubica and Mercedes driver Nico Rosberg have both spent time in the top four this morning, but the Pole is the only one to have stayed there. Rosberg has dipped in and out of the top five, trading spots with Mark Webber and Fernando Alonso.

Rubens Barrichello bowed out of the session very early on; the Brazilian had completed only four laps before bringing out the yellow flags when he stopped due to an unspecified mechanical failure. But despite the mishap, Barrichello did not set the slowest time of the morning, an honour that usually belongs to the man who crashed out first. Instead, that crown can be claimed by HRT's Sakon Yamamoto, whose efforts after sixteen laps saw him 1.3s down on Barrichello's time, and 6.177s off the pace.

Recent revelations that HRT are being sued by their legal team for unpaid bills explain Yamamoto's continuing presence in the car. The question is, for how much longer can they justify it? Money in the hand is all good and well, but the team need to be looking towards their long-term future. For that they need sponsors, who are usually attracted by results.

F1 Times (unofficial)

1. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.23.693s
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.23.790s
3. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.23.967s
4. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1.24.120s
5. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.24.129s
6. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.24.446s
7. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.24.512s
8. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.24.543s
9. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.24.648s
10. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.24.756s
11. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1.24.841s
12. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.24.923s
13. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.25.292s
14. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.25.318s

15. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1.25.320s
 16. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.25.334s
 17. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.25.897s
 18. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.26.772s
 19. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.26.898s
 20. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1.26.956s
 21. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.27.374s
 22. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1.28.256s
 23. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.28.516s
 24. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1.29.870s
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F1 Monza Blog – FP2 in hotter, sunnier Italy

Jeans were a bad idea today. So were all of the coats I saw people carrying on the train from Milan. Necessary in the pre-dawn hours, when the city felt chilly, coats have become heavy encumbrances to be carted round ad infinitum.

As the day has progressed, Monza has become enveloped in a blanket of stifling heat. Were it not for the lush environment, the trees, and the gentle breeze, this would be a very unpleasant day for those in the stands. Physically, that is. There is nothing unpleasant about passing the time by watching Formula 1 cars lap one of the world's most appealing circuits.

McLaren driver Jenson Button was fastest man of the morning, and only Sebastian Vettel and Lewis Hamilton were able to get close to his time. If the weekend continues in a similar vein, Saturday's qualifying session is likely to be dominated by McLaren and Red Bull, although Robert Kubica is in with a good chance for Renault.

In the interval between FP1 and FP2 the track temperature has been steadily climbing, by what appears to be a degree every five to ten minutes. With the air temperature at 25 degrees and track temperature at 37 degrees, getting heat into tyres is not going to be a problem this afternoon.

Initially, FP2 looked as though it would be another McLaren walkover. Jenson Button held the top slot for much of the first half of the session, before Lewis Hamilton pipped him to the post. Hamilton looked unassailable for around half an hour, but in the final twenty minutes everything changed in a number of instants.

First, Felipe Massa pulled out an absolute blinder of a lap, posting a 1.23.061s that looked as though it would last until the end of the session. But Massa was dethroned by Sebastian Vettel and Fernando Alonso, both of whom broke into the 1.22s within minutes of the Brazilian's flyer.

The number of changes at the top of the leaderboards today is an excellent sign for race fans. Should this continue, the possibilities for Saturday's qualifying and Sunday's race are endless. The Red Bulls, McLarens, and Ferraris all have a shot at the front row, while Nico Rosberg and Robert Kubica should not be discounted.

Monza lap record holder Rubens Barrichello (1.21.046s, set in 2004) has also made a strong showing this afternoon, making up for the lack of running this morning. The Brazilian's FP1 running was cut short when he suffered a total loss of drive to his car and ground to a halt. Stig-beater Rubens has won here three times before – 2002, 2004, and 2009 – and he should qualify well tomorrow. His car is not quite up to challenging for the front two rows, but P6 is not beyond the realms of possibility. Teammate Nico Hulkenberg has also impressed, and is a strong contender for a top ten grid spot.

Mark Webber had a difficult afternoon here in Italy. At no point was he able to match his teammate for pace, and shortly before the end of the session his car gave up the ghost and sputtered to a stop on the final corner. On the previous lap the Australian was able to set a 1.23.415s lap, which is competitive but not exceptional. Webber fans should remember that the Australian tends not to show his hand on Fridays, preferring to keep a few tenths in reserve for Saturday's qualifying.

Bruno Senna was the biggest loser on Friday afternoon, and was unable to set a time. Two minutes into the session the young Brazilian had brought out the yellow flags while his car was wheeled behind the barriers. Then, once he and car had returned to the pits, been dusted down, and sent back on their way – a process that took the best part of an hour – Senna was in the gravel and out of the session almost immediately, without having set a timed lap.

FP2 Times (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.22.839s
2. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.22.915s
3. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.23.061s
4. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.23.154s
5. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.23.210s
6. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.23.415s
7. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.23.708s
8. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1.23.709s
9. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1.23.852s
10. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.23.857s
11. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.24.181s
12. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.24.380s
13. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.24.407s
14. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.24.448s
15. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.24.517s

16. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1.24.547s
 17. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.24.785s
 18. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.25.106s
 19. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.26.204s
 20. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.26.306s
 21. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1.26.631s
 22. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.26.676s
 23. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1.29.498s
 24. Bruno Senna (HRT) [no time set]
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F1 Monza Blog – the Friday summary

Friday form does not a weekend make. But Friday can give a rough indication of relative performance, an idea of the various teams' strengths and weaknesses at the circuit. Accordingly, here is a team by team rundown.

Red Bull, believe it or not, were quick. The paddock was shocked to see Sebastian Vettel go fastest in the afternoon, as the RB6 has struggled all season long. Ahem. Back in the real world, Red Bull showed as much pace in Monza as they have everywhere else. Vettel was second fastest in F1, and top dog in FP2, results that are pretty familiar to anyone who's followed the 2010 season.

The closest Red Bull got to surprising us was with Mark Webber's performance – while not slow, the Australian was around 0.6s slower than his teammate in both sessions. But even that is no guarantee of the drivers' relative performance come Saturday's qualifying. Webber often seems to find a magic second on Saturday afternoon, and both drivers are likely to challenge for the front row.

Webber's afternoon session was cut short by car trouble, a possible cause for his slightly slower pace. "I lost water pressure in P2," he said, "and had to stop the car, which compromised our running a little bit... I have to find a little bit of lap time myself, but the car is performing and I'm quite happy."

McLaren's Jenson Button was man of the morning. The Frome flyer leapt from the pits, set a quasi-perfect first flying lap, and then waited to be dethroned. And waited, and waited. It didn't happen. Teammate Lewis Hamilton was marginally slower, but McLaren have reasons to be positive this weekend. Not only does Monza suit the MP4-25, but the morning practice session was (I believe) the first of the season in which both McLaren drivers set faster times than a Red Bull.

It was not to last. While both Hamilton and Button spent part of FP2 at the top of the timesheets, they were beaten towards the end of the session by both Ferrari drivers and Sebastian Vettel. But the margins were wafer thin, as they always are in Formula 1. When top-flight drivers are competing for pole, traffic or a badly-timed yellow flag can mean the difference between pole and P5, and that is the situation we are likely to see during qualifying.

At the end of F1, it looked as though Ferrari were in for a potentially difficult weekend in front of their home supporters. While neither Fernando Alonso nor Felipe Massa were particularly slow, they weren't quite fast enough and were unable to break into the top seven. But it was all change in the afternoon, when Massa strung together a beautiful lap, took the top spot, and gave his teammate the motivation to deliver more of the same.

The presence of the Tifosi here at Monza can never be underestimated – their support seems to feed directly into Ferrari's fuel tank, adding power at every turn. Could the F10 be Formula 1's greenest machine, the second generation of fan-powered cars? Whether the Scuderia win or lose this weekend, the fact that the team will push as hard as possible to deliver a win for their fans is the safest bet in motorsport.

What a difference a lunch break makes. In the morning, Mercedes driver Nico Rosberg was challenging for the top spots on the leaderboard, and the young German looked to be a good bet for the front three rows of the grid. But in the afternoon he had slipped down to P10, one second slower than pace-setter Vettel.

Rosberg had a much better day than teammate Michael Schumacher, however. The five-time Monza winner was P10 in the morning, 1.1s slower than Button, and P14 in the afternoon, 1.6s slower than Vettel. Mercedes have moved their focus to the 2011 challenger, and the team do not expect to challenge for any more podiums this season. Rosberg is a possible candidate for a good finish, but Schumacher seems to have accepted that the racing has changed, and he's not quite up to speed this season.

Renault rookie Vitaly Petrov had some interesting comments to make in light of his Italian F1 debut. "It was a learning day too get used to the lower downforce levels we use here in Monza, which make the car quite interesting to drive," he said in a team statement. "You can feel the car moving a lot more, so you have to be very precise with your driving and not make any small mistakes." The Russian driver was remarkably consistent, and finished in P13 in both sessions.

For Renault, as with all the teams, the biggest challenge on a Friday is to find the right set-up for the circuit. But the French team were also taking advantages of the practice running to do further evaluation work on the team's F-duct. Chief Race Engineer Alan Permane said in a statement: "On Robert's car this afternoon we also tried using different downforce levels, and we must evaluate the results before making our decision on the ultimate configuration we will run tomorrow. ... In terms of performance, Vitaly lost running time because of a brake problem at the end of the session, while Robert had traffic on his fastest laps. I am confident that there's more performance to come tomorrow."

Force India's Tonio Liuzzi had a red letter morning on the Friday of his home Grand Prix. The Italian racer was in the top half of the standings for most of FP3, and in his final seconds on track Liuzzi crossed the line in 1.24.512s, fast enough to push Fernando Alonso down into P8. Reserve driver Paul di Resta took the helm of Adrian Sutil's car in the morning, and finished in a very respectable P12.

Chief Race Engineer Dominic Harlow was pleased with the team's overall running. "Obviously we are looking at downforce levels and rear wing set-up for the high-speed nature of the track. We've been evaluating our Monza aero package, and generally we're very pleased with how it's gone. It's very close amongst the teams from P4 onwards, and overall we think our race performance looks fairly strong."

Williams had a mixed bag of results in Monza today. In the morning session, Rubens Barrichello retired with an unspecified mechanical failure that resulted in a total loss of drive. Nico Hulkenberg finished the morning session just outside the top ten, which is no mean feat when eight of the top spots are occupied by the four biggest teams.

But the afternoon was far kinder to Williams, with both drivers finishing in the top ten. Barrichello posted a 1:23.708s for P7, while Hulkenberg's 1:23.852s saw the German rookie in P9, one second faster than his best time of the morning. Assuming that all goes well tomorrow – in mechanical terms, that is – both Williams drivers should get through to Q3.

Both Sauber drivers struggled with grip on track today, and as a result they were quite low on the leaderboards this morning – P16 and P17 in the morning, P15 and P16 in the afternoon. Technical Director James Key said of the team's efforts that "it was a little bit of a tough day with trying to get the most out of the car. ... So we need to work hard overnight and see what we can do. We will definitely make some mechanical changes, and we have to evaluate the downforce level for tomorrow."

Toro Rosso spent part of the morning session data-harvesting on Sebastian Buemi's car. The Swiss driver did a number of speed runs with the team's F-duct fitted, before spending the rest of the day trying out a range of low downforce configurations with the hope of finding the perfect balance for Monza. Jaime Alguersuari's afternoon was cut short as a result of an as yet unspecified mechanical problem with the car, but the team deny it was anything to do with their low exhaust configuration.

According to Chief Engineer Laurent Mekies, "we ran the low exhaust on both cars throughout the day for the first time and we had no issues with this. However, there will be a lot of work to do tonight to ensure the new system can be used on Sunday, because racing is another step. There were no issues with the tyre comparison, because by this point of the season we have a good understanding of what to expect from the different compounds."

Lotus had a perfectly respectable day, but they always do when Jarno Trulli's hydraulics haven't failed. Trulli won the FPI and FP2 teammate wars, beating Heikki Kovalainen in both sessions, but the Italian may have found added motivation from the crowds, much like Liuzzi and the Ferrari drivers. Trulli was very consistent, finishing in P19 in both sessions.

Kovalainen ended the morning half a second slower than his teammate, but was able to reduce the gap to a tenth by the afternoon. Provided the cars behave themselves all weekend, Lotus should deliver more of what we're used to – a good result from a new team, and a possible reduction in gap to the Toro Rossos usually found just ahead.

HRT was spared the blushes of occupying the bottom two spots in both of this morning's sessions by Barrichello's FPI retirement. But nothing could spare them from Sakon Yamamoto's lap times, which are in need of serious improvement. Yamamoto's best time of the morning was 6.2s shy of Jenson Button's best lap, but more importantly it was 1.3s slower than Barrichello's best effort before his enforced – and early – retirement from the session.

The afternoon was not much better. Bruno Senna, who was 0.9s slower than Heikki Kovalainen in the morning, was unable to complete a timed lap due to two separate incidents, the first of which occurred two minutes after the pitlane opened. Yamamoto was 0.4s faster in the afternoon than he had been in the morning, but was 6.7s slower than the pace-setters, a drop in relative performance.

While Virgin were hardly top of the timesheets today, the team had a very productive session. There were no mechanical issues to report, and both Lucas di Grassi and Timo Glock were able to best Lotus driver Heikki Kovalainen in FPI, while Glock was the fastest driver from a new team. Lotus and Virgin see each other as their main competition, and all victories are celebrated.

As with all of the other teams on the grid, Virgin spent the day focussing on set-up work, trialling downforce options and gear ratios. According to Mark Herd, the team's head of performance and race engineering, "we have experienced a very productive day with good mileage on both cars and no major problems. The unique characteristics of the Monza circuit meant that we had a little more work to do than on a normal Friday, however we completed our planned programme, together with testing a number of new development parts."

F1 Monza Blog – FP3 in yet more glorious sunshine

The floor of the press room is vibrating as the teams complete their preparations for the final practice session of the Monza Grand Prix weekend in the garages below. With only a few minutes remaining before the pit lane opens for business, the track temperature is a relatively cool 17 degrees with air temperature at 22 degrees.

There was no rain overnight, and plenty of on-track action this morning, so the track is rubbered in. Once the tyres have picked up heat, lap times should be comparable to those set yesterday. A few teams complained of grip problems yesterday afternoon, as the hot track became a slippery rubber surface, but the morning should present fewer problems in that regard.

As usual, the start of the session is replete with installation laps, and it takes almost fifteen minutes for times to start appearing on the boards. The initial benchmark was set by Michael Schumacher, but Robert Kubica, Jenson Button, and Lewis Hamilton all crossed the line shortly afterwards, each taking the number one slot from the man before.

These early lap times are in the low 1:24s, but as the frontrunners get into their stride, the benchmark becomes Lewis Hamilton's 1:23.076s, set on the British driver's second timed lap.

Ferrari drivers Felipe Massa and Fernando Alonso waited until the session was half-run before heading out for their first timed laps. By the time the Scuderia pair begin their first timed runs, the top four spots on the leaderboard are occupied by the Red Bull and McLaren foursome. In P5 is a blisteringly quick Nico Hulkenberg, with a 1:23.680s, followed by Robert Kubica.

Alonso crosses the line in a 1.24.095s, good enough for P7. Teammate Massa's first lap sees the Brazilian in P6, having set a 1.23.886s. But Alonso responds with a 1.23.460s, putting him hot on the heels of Jenson Button in P4.

It looks as though the fight for pole will be a three-way battle between Red Bull, Ferrari, and McLaren, Formula 1's undoubted big three of 2010. No surprises there, then – based on form this weekend, and across the recent races, the top three teams are in a class of their own.

The real surprises this morning are in the middle of the grid. It's safe to say on any given weekend that three new teams will be at the bottom of the time sheets, with the three big teams at the top. Only the middle twelve see any sort of consistent upsets, and FP3 at Monza is cause for food for thought.

Michael Schumacher, five-time Monza winner, is dramatically slower than Nico Rosberg, but is also behind both Toro Rosso drivers. Mercedes spent the first part of the season referred to as one of the big four, but their recent decision to concentrate on 2011 has seen the German team firmly ensconced in the middle of the pack.

Mercedes-powered Adrian Sutil is just out of the top ten, an unexpected result for the team. Force India's Mercedes engine and working F-duct should help the team here in Monza, but the level of competition at the circuit is some of the highest of the season. There's something about Monza that enables the bulk of drivers to find hidden tenths not present elsewhere. Caused in part by the track configuration, partly by enthusiasm, and partly through the joy of the challenge, Monza is a good opportunity to shake up the books for a weekend.

With twenty minutes remaining of the session, Mark Webber was out, having stopped on track at Turn 2. It is unlikely the Australian will see any more running this morning, meaning his best possible result is to hold onto P6 until the session comes to an end.

The final ten minutes of the session were an outright battle for supremacy, with five of the six top-seeded drivers taking their turn at the top and Nico Rosberg bumping Mark Webber down into P7.

FP3 Times (unofficial)

1. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.22.498s
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.22.545s
3. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.22.644s
4. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.22.648s
5. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.22.724s
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.22.946s
7. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.23.082s
8. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1.23.129s
9. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1.23.209s
10. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.23.303s
11. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.23.450s
12. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.23.673s
13. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.23.896s
14. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.23.908s
15. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.23.909s
16. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.23.967s
17. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1.24.191s
18. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.24.439s
19. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.25.788s
20. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.25.925s
21. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.26.434s
22. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1.26.682s
23. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1.27.471s
24. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1.28.730s

F1 Monza Blog – Q1 in Italy

The biggest story to come out of Friday's lunch break was the news that Timo Glock will be taking a five-place grid drop at tomorrow's race. The Virgin crew had to break a gearbox seal to replace the differential, and Article 28.6 of the Sporting Regulations requires a five-place penalty.

Otherwise, it has been a pleasant and tranquil two hours between sessions. The paddock was absolutely heaving at lunchtime, filled with guests, VIPs, and sponsors, especially in and around Ferrari. The McLaren Brand Centre was filled with people making plans for the Stereophonics concert in central Milan tonight, and very little of the chat focussed on the qualifying session to come.

Teams have spent the past hour preparing for the afternoon's work, and the press room floor rumbles accordingly, a reassuring GP presence. The noonday sun has heated up both air and track, with the latter now standing at 38 degrees. Air temperature is 26 degrees, and very sweltering.

And with the roar of the first car leaving the pitlane, Q1 is underway.

As ever, once the pits empty it is impossible to keep track of the constant changes of position on the leaderboards. Times fall faster than a house of cards in a hurricane as everyone fights for the right to take to the track in Q2.

At the midway point, Tonio Liuzzi, Adrian Sutil, Jaime Alguersuari, and Sebastian Buemi are all potential candidates for the dropout zone, along with

the six drivers from the new teams. At the top end of the board are the usual suspects fighting their own private war for best of the session. But the real focus is on those close to dropping out.

Conscious of his penalty in tomorrow's race, Glock is a man on a mission, the fastest driver from a new team. The last thing the German driver wants is to start from P24 when P23 is a possibility. But an incident involving Glock and Vitaly Petrov on the first lap of Q1 is currently being investigated by the Stewards, and the outcome could be further penalties.

And with just over a minute remaining, the dropout zone has changed. Jarno Trulli has outpaced Tonio Liuzzi and is currently in P18, while the Force India driver sits in P19. The Sauber drivers occupy the two spots just ahead, but the gap to Trulli is such that neither man is at real risk of dropping out.

The session is over, and there is much jubilation in the Lotus garage as both of the teams drivers finish ahead of Liuzzi, who will start tomorrow's race from a provisional P20.

Dropout zone

18. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.25.540s
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.25.742s
20. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.25.774s
21. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.25.934*
22. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1.25.974s
23. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1.26.874s
24. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1.27.020s

* Timo Glock has been issued with a five-place grid penalty, and will start Sunday's race from a provisional P24.

F1 Monza Blog – Q2 in Italy

As Q2 begins, the battle for the front has become more important. The three major teams are unlikely to drop out, barring mechanical failures or on-track mistakes, leaving eleven drivers battling for four potential spots in Q3.

Margins are growing ever tighter, and milliseconds make all the difference. As a result, the track fills up as soon as the pitlane opens, no one wanting to jeopardise tomorrow's start position by getting caught in traffic – or worse – in a last gasp attempt to pull through to Q3.

Five minutes in to the session and the top six spots are occupied by the men from Ferrari, McLaren, and Red Bull. Quelle surprise. But there's movement at the top of the board as Robert Kubica and Nico Hulkenberg upset the apple cart, popping up in P4 and P6 respectively.

As Q2 approaches the midpoint, those drivers at risk of dropping out this session are Pedro de la Rosa, Jaime Alguersuari, Vitaly Petrov, Kamui Kobayashi, Sebastian Buemi, Michael Schumacher, and Adrian Sutil. The gap from P17 to P7 is 1.4s, but there is more opportunity for change between P12 and P8. Even those drivers currently setting times in the high 1.22s are not completely safe.

With five minutes remaining the track empties as everyone piles into the pits for a tyre change and the final runs on fresh rubber. Hulkenberg and Kubica continue to look good on their new tyres, and both drivers are almost certain to make it through to Q3 with the big three.

And the chequered flag has fallen. Adrian Sutil and Michael Schumacher were the highest-profile scalps claimed in Q2, and their departure has left the door wide open for impressive performances from Nico Hulkenberg and Rubens Barrichello. Barrichello's early exit from Spa notwithstanding, the Williams team appear to be on the ascendancy at the moment.

Dropout zone

11. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.23.199s
 12. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.23.388s
 13. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.23.659s
 14. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.23.681s
 15. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.23.819s
 16. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.23.919s
 17. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1.24.044s
-

F1 Monza Blog – Q3 in Italy

And after the briefest of blinks, the final qualifying session of the Italian Grand Prix gets under way. In the next ten minutes we will see a no holds barred battle between Red Bull, Ferrari, and McLaren, all of whom have a decent shot at pole this weekend.

Could it be the second non-Red Bull pole of the season? Only time will tell.

Felipe Massa is the first man to tear down the pitlane, starting his campaign for Monza supremacy with no risk of traffic at the start. Behind him are Mark Webber and fellow Ferrari driver Fernando Alonso. What with this being Ferrari's home grand prix – and the negative press the team have suffered in recent weeks – a pole here would be excellent for team morale.

And Fernando Alonso may well deliver – with the session half run, he is sitting at the top of the timesheets, albeit with a gap of only three-tenths, a not insurmountable margin. Jenson Button is just behind, with Massa in P3 and Lewis Hamilton in P4. The gap between the top three drivers is a wafer-thin 0.4s.

It is interesting to note that the Ferrari and Red Bull drivers have completed more laps in qualifying than anyone else – while the other drivers are in the mid to high teens, the fab four are in the low to mid twenties.

With less than a minute remaining, all ten challengers are out on track. Alonso has held the top slot throughout the session, but his time is under threat from nine hungry men. None of them quite hungry enough. In his first home appearance for Ferrari, Fernando Alonso has gifted the Tifosi with their first pole of the season.

Provisional grid

1. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.21.962s
2. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.22.084s
3. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.22.293s
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.22.433s
5. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.22.623s
6. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.22.675s
7. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.23.027s
8. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1.23.037s
9. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1.23.039s
10. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.23.328s
11. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.23.199s
12. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.23.388s
13. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.23.659s
14. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.23.681s
15. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.23.819s
16. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.23.919s
17. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1.24.044s
18. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.25.540s
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.25.742s
20. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.25.774s
21. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.25.934*
22. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1.25.974s
23. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1.26.874s
24. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1.27.020s

F1 Monza Blog – the post-qualifying analysis

The Tifosi will be celebrating tonight, there's no doubt about that. And if the empty grandstands along the pit straight are any indication, celebrations are already underway. Fernando Alonso scored pole position at his first Italian Grand Prix as a Ferrari driver, a storybook result for fans of the team.

Ferrari teammate Felipe Massa will line up on the second row on Sunday, giving the Scuderia a decent shot at a 1-2 finish in Monza. Of course, anything can – and does – happen over the course of a race, from bad starts to traffic, collisions, and penalties. Ferrari's good showing this afternoon is no guarantee of a win tomorrow.

After all, Red Bull have demonstrated this season how easy it is to lose the pole advantage. Mark Webber had a difficult start in Spa, while Sebastian Vettel has lost more than one race to mechanical difficulties. Bad luck can happen to any driver at any time.

But winning a race is not about good luck or bad luck. Strategy also plays a big part, and pit stop strategy will be very important tomorrow. According to Bridgestone's Hirohide Hamashima, "the lap time difference between the two compounds here is not very big. This leaves good strategy options for tomorrow's race, and there is also good interest with different car set-ups on the grid.

"Even though we have seen high track and ambient temperatures, both of our allocated compounds look to offer strong performance over a stint duration. In terms of strategy, I predict first stops around lap 14, however even those in the top ten who start on used option tyres could go much further than this without significant performance drop off should they choose to do so."

Before qualifying began Timo Glock was issued with a five-place grid penalty for changing his differential, which changed the shape of the bottom of the grid. But during qualifying Glock was impeded on track by Vitaly Petrov, and the Renault driver was subsequently issued with a five-place grid drop of his own. Petrov initially qualified in P15, and his drop to P20 promoted Tonio Liuzzi, Heikki Kovalainen, Jarno Trulli, Pedro de la Rosa, and Jaime Alguersuari.

The shake-ups at the back of the grid should provide for on-track excitements tomorrow. Liuzzi's day was marred by two instances of total loss of drive, but the team hopes that the problem has now been resolved. According to Force India's press release, "Tonio Liuzzi endured a frustrating qualifying, completing just three laps in Q1 when his VJM03 lost drive on his out lap. Unfortunately the problem proved too difficult to rectify within the qualifying session and Tonio was forced to end his session early without setting a competitive lap time. He will start 20th [now 19th] but should be able to rapidly make up positions given the pace demonstrated on longer runs yesterday."

While the team's faith in Liuzzi should be applauded, it is entirely possible that the mystery problem will recur tomorrow, putting the Italian driver out

of the race entirely. If Force India decide to apply to the FIA for permission to do further work on their car this evening, Liuzzi will almost certainly be issued with a grid drop penalty before the race.

Should all go well for the Italian racer, however, he will be one to watch as he battles his way up through the field. Liuzzi's Mercedes engine is the most powerful on the second half of the grid, and that power gives the Force India driver a theoretical advantage on Monza's long straights.

Renault rookie Vitaly Petrov is another one to watch at the back. The Russian driver is getting into his stride in Formula 1, and has delivered a number of memorable performances in recent races. If he can get a good start off the line, passing Liuzzi before the first corner, he is liable to pass drivers with relative ease until he reaches Kamui Kobayashi, Sauber's Japanese cowboy. Every weekend Kobayashi attacks the track with relish, and he is always happy to engage in a battle for position. Watching Petrov and Kobayashi slug it out could be one of the highlights of Sunday's race.

The middle section of the grid is also likely to provide thrills and spills from the start. Rubens Barrichello, Michael Schumacher, and Adrian Sutil all set very similar qualifying times, and the three men will battle for a points finish from the very beginning. Barrichello's P10 advantage could be cancelled out by the fresh tyres on the cars behind, making him one to watch at the start of the race. The Brazilian's early exit from Spa is further motivation to deliver a points finish to the team in Monza.

But Kobayashi could also find himself mixing it up with Schumacher et al. The young Japanese driver qualified on the row behind Schumacher, but he has already shown that he is unafraid of making a move on anyone, legend or not.

At the top end of the grid it's all to play for. Both Ferrari drivers will be determined to finish on the podium – 1-2 if possible – as a gift to the tifosi who have supported them through what has been a tumultuous season thus far. But there are four other men up front determined to take the prize for themselves: at this point of the season the siren call of the driver's title grows stronger with every race meeting.

Jenson Button had his best qualifying result of the season, and will line up on the front row alongside Alonso. Button was one of the three championship contenders not to score points in Spa, and the British driver is keen to reassert his claim to the crown. If the McLaren driver gets a good start off the line he should be able to keep at least one Ferrari behind him, but that is no guarantee of eventual success.

Button and teammate Lewis Hamilton ran different set ups in qualifying, and that seems to be why Hamilton's best qualifying time was half a second slower than that of his teammate. Where Button went for a high downforce package with the F-duct, Hamilton elected to run a lower downforce set up without the F-duct, giving the young driver a theoretical advantage on the straights, but making life more complicated in the corners.

But Hamilton's low downforce advantage does not appear to have cancelled out the F-duct advantage, hence his surprising P5 result. The 2008 champion visibly lacked grip when compared with Button, and the set-up decision could prove to be a costly mistake if he suffers similar traction problems in tomorrow's race.

Another potential problem for Hamilton is Sebastian Vettel, who will line up alongside the Brit on the third row. Vettel has made a number of errors this season, most likely due to his need to succeed, and those errors have proved costly for those nearby – teammate Mark Webber in Turkey, and Button at the last race in Spa. Should the Red Bull driver make another costly mistake tomorrow, neighbour Hamilton is the driver most likely to be in the firing line.

Of the top six drivers on tomorrow's grid, five are fighting tooth and nail for the championship. Expect no quarter from no man – the battle for the crown has reached the serious stage, and it's on-track war from here on out.

Revised grid (provisional)

1. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
2. Jenson Button (McLaren)
3. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull)
5. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren)
6. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)
7. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes)
8. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams)
9. Robert Kubica (Renault)
10. Rubens Barrichello (Williams)
11. Adrian Sutil (Force India)
12. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
13. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
14. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso)
15. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso)
16. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber)
17. Jarno Trulli (Lotus)
18. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus)
19. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India)
20. Vitaly Petrov (Renault)*
21. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin)
22. Bruno Senna (HRT)
23. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT)
24. Timo Glock (Virgin)**

* Vitaly Petrov was issued with a five-place grid penalty for impeding Timo Glock in qualifying.

** Timo Glock was issued with a five-place grid penalty for breaking a gearbox seal after FP3.

F1 Monza Blog – The Italian Grand Prix as it happened

With less than five minutes remaining before the lights go out at Monza, the stands along the pit straight are surprisingly empty. But the Tifosi who have managed to score seats in the coveted spot are out in full force, flying flags, tooting horns, and cheering like mad.

The track temperature is 36 degrees, meaning that track conditions should be pretty similar to yesterday afternoon's qualifying session, good news for those who got their set ups right. Air temperature is 25 degrees, and the cockpits will be like infernos.

In a matter of milliseconds, the race will begin, and fans around the world will be treated to 53 5.793km laps, making a total race distance of 306.72km.

Grid penalties were issued to Vitaly Petrov and Timo Glock on Saturday, but Tonio Liuzzi escaped a penalty despite switching his engine. Force India applied to the FIA for permission to swap his engine with a used model in accordance with Article 34.1 of the Sporting Regulations, and permission was granted.

As the drivers filed out for the formation lap, a forlorn Kamui Kobayashi started from the pits. The Japanese driver had problems shifting on his installation lap, and the pit crew did all they could to fix the problem in the limited time on offer. But their work bore no fruit, and Kobayashi retired on the first lap.

Jenson Button made the best start off the line, and was ahead of both Ferrari drivers before the first minute of the race had elapsed. Lewis Hamilton overtook Mark Webber, but banged wheels with Felipe Massa before riding over the kerbs, damaging his suspension, and ending his race on the first lap. Returning to the paddock on Lap 7, Hamilton kept his helmet on until he was safely inside the McLaren motorhome, away from the prying lenses.

By lap 4, Michael Schumacher had passed Mark Webber, and it looked as though the Australian might be in for a difficult afternoon. But it is foolhardy to discount Webber until the chequered flag has fallen, and by lap 6 he had repassed Schumacher and was setting his sights on the pack in front.

The early stages of the race offered little in the way of on-track excitements. The gap between Button and Fernando Alonso grew and shrank with every lap, as the Spaniard gave chase on one lap and the Brit responded on the next. The Ferrari driver set purple lap after purple lap, but was unable to get past the McLaren driver, thanks in no small part to the turbulence caused by Button's high-downforce wing configuration.

By lap 9, Button, Alonso, and Massa had pulled out a 5.1s lead on the cars behind, and it was evident that barring any crashes or mechanical failures, the podium was almost certain to feature the three drivers, with the order to be determined after the pit stops.

Adrian Sutil made his first pit stop on lap 3, and consequently spent the afternoon fighting his way up from the back of the grid. It was courtesy of the Force India driver that we saw the bulk of overtaking manoeuvres in the early part of the race, as the powerful Mercedes engine chewed its way through the backmarkers ahead.

By lap 18 it was clear that despite Sutil's best efforts, a points finish was beyond the realm of possibility – he was 36 seconds behind P10, an almost insurmountable margin.

Jaime Alguersuari was issued with a drive-through penalty for cutting the chicane of Turn 2 and gaining an advantage as a result: the Toro Rosso driver served the penalty on lap 22 and waved goodbye to the remote possibility of a finish in the points.

On lap 21, Webber slipped past teammate Sebastian Vettel; on the next lap the young German reported engine problems over the radio. Vettel was able to manage his engine until the end of the race, and didn't suffer a repeat of the Bahrain Grand Prix, which saw the Red Bull driver slide backwards through the points as he lost power.

The backmarkers began to pit around lap 24, but by lap 30 none of the top 13 drivers had hinted at a stop. By lap 25 Button, Alonso, and Massa had nearly enough of a margin on the pack behind to pit safely, but the name of the game is strategy, and the strategists said to wait.

The charge to the pits took place between laps 35 and 37, but Vettel and Vitaly Petrov stayed out on track long after everyone else had changed their tyres. It was in the pit stops that the race was decided – McLaren didn't time Button's quite right, while Ferrari picked the perfect moment for Alonso, and the Spanish driver pitted from an inherited P1 and pulled out ahead of the pack – a masterstroke from the Ferrari brains.

Alonso's pit stop was nearly a second faster than Button's, further cementing the Spanish driver's advantage.

As soon as Alonso was leading the race, the Asturian began to set fastest lap after fastest lap, and by lap 44 he was 3.6s ahead of Button in P2. It was abundantly clear that the McLaren had been holding up the two Ferraris; if Massa had left the pits ahead of Button the Scuderia would almost certainly be celebrating a 1-2 finish.

On lap 52 – the penultimate of the race – Vettel finally piled into the pits for a change of rubber. The Red Bull driver entered and left the pits in P4, another strategic masterstroke from the brains on the pit wall.

Fernando Alonso took the chequered flag after 53 laps, followed closely by Jenson Button and Felipe Massa.

Race Classification (unofficial)

1. Fernando Alonso (25pts)
2. Jenson Button (18pts)
3. Felipe Massa (15pts)

4. Sebastian Vettel (12pts)
5. Nico Rosberg (10pts)
6. Mark Webber (8pts)
7. Nico Hulkenberg (6pts)
8. Robert Kubica (4pts)
9. Michael Schumacher (2pts)
10. Rubens Barrichello (1pt)
11. Sebastian Buemi
12. Tonio Liuzzi
13. Vitaly Petrov
14. Pedro de la Rosa
15. Jaime Alguersuari
16. Adrian Sutil
17. Timo Glock
18. Heikki Kovalainen
19. Sakon Yamamoto
20. Lucas di Grassi (DNF)

Not classified

- Jarno Trulli (DNF)
 - Bruno Senna (DNF)
 - Lewis Hamilton (DNF)
 - Kamui Kobayashi (DNF)
-