



F1 Suzuka Blog – F1 at Suzuka Circuit

Something within earshot of the press room in Suzuka keeps making the TARDIS noise from Doctor Who. It's rather off-putting watching the cars circulate, half expecting to see a blue police box pop up in the middle of the track as some crazy bloke with a sonic screwdriver attempts to stop the drivers from committing some dastardly Dalek plot.

Why yes, sleep deprivation is still the order of the day here in Japan, thanks for asking.

Better rested are the drivers, who are preparing to put the cars through their paces for the first practice session on the infamous – and universally adored – Suzuka Circuit.

While Thursday was an almost perfect day in Japan, neither too hot nor too cold, with nary a cloud in the sky, Friday has dawned in a rather more overcast manner. The sky is heavy with grey cloud, but with humidity levels starting around 60 percent and falling steadily, there is little to no chance of rain this morning. Track and air are both warm, with the former at 33 degrees and the latter at 24 degrees.

As usual, the first half hour of the session is filled with installation laps and minor tweaks, and no times are set. But with an hour remaining, the leaderboards begin to fill up as the session begins in earnest.

Of the potential championship contenders, Lewis Hamilton is the first man to make a strong showing in Japan, heading to the top of the leaderboards within a couple of timed laps. But the McLaren driver is soon dethroned by the Red Bull of Sebastian Vettel, with the Milton Keynes based team showing their usual half a second single lap advantage.

McLaren arrived in Japan with a raft of upgrades and new parts for the MP4-25, some of which were scheduled to make their debut at Singapore but were temporarily shelved due to concerns over reliability. The Woking team are relying on a good show here in Suzuka, as their championship campaign depends on it. Lewis Hamilton's recent spate of retirements has made the WDC more challenging than it was when the teams left Belgium, and the ever-reliable Jenson Button is a few points behind his teammate in the drivers' standings.

But the pressure to perform may yet cost the team dear, as Hamilton found to his chagrin when his practice session ended early, thanks to a crash at the second Degner corner. The British driver ran wide, smacked into the tyre barrier, and suffered heavy damage to the front left corner. His session is over, and the team will have to work hard to get the car race-worthy in the three hours leading up to FP2.

Despite his early exit from the session, Hamilton's original benchmark time of 1.33.643s is good enough to see the British driver in P5 half an hour after crashing out. It is a good indicator of the McLaren's potential pace this weekend, but the MP4-25 has nothing on the RB6 – Vettel and teammate Mark Webber are currently first and second on the timesheets, with a half-second lead over the competition.

The gap between the two Red Bull drivers is 0.048s, barely a hair's breadth. Both Webber and Vettel have the potential to start Sunday's race from pole position, and there is a lot of safe money resting on the pair locking out the front row. In 2009 Vettel won the race from pole, while Webber scored the fastest lap, and the RB6 is even better suited to the circuit than the RB5 was.

Sitting between Hamilton and the two Red Bulls are Renault's Robert Kubica and Force India's Adrian Sutil. While driver skill is a major factor, engines

can't be discounted here in Japan. Kubica in P3 shares a powerplant with the two men above him in the standings, while Sutil and Hamilton are both Mercedes-powered. The high downforce Suzuka Circuit sees drivers on full throttle for around 70 percent of the lap, and engine power is vital here. It is no coincidence that Kubica is within half a second of the Red Bull pair, while the Mercedes-powered drivers are around half a second slower than the Pole.

Of the remaining strong championship contenders, Jenson Button and Fernando Alonso have been relatively quiet this morning. Button has had to shoulder the responsibility for all of McLaren's aero testing since his teammate's crash, and the constant configuration changes and set-up tests have seen the 2009 champion post a best time of 1.34.042s, nearly half a second slower than his teammate's best effort.

Scuderia Ferrari are also in full-on test mode, with both drivers circulating around the 1.34s mark. Felipe Massa is marginally faster than Alonso, but the gap is so small as to make very little difference.

And with less than two minutes remaining before the chequered flag falls, Button comes off into the gravel at 130R, but manages to recover from a sideways slide before his car hits the barriers. After a quick trip to the pits for new rubber and a check-up, Button is sent back out for a final timed lap before the session comes to an end.

Although the pits are nearly empty, times are unlikely to change. Tyre allocations are at an absolute minimum for F1, and all of the drivers currently circulating are shod in old rubber, past its peak. With the chequered flag being waved and a raft of drivers on track, expectations are that Red Bull will hold on to their nearly unassailable lead.

Looking further down the timesheets, of particular note are some of the teammate wars. Former Mercedes compatriots Michael Schumacher, Nick Heidfeld, and Nico Rosberg finished the session in P8, 9, and P10 respectively, split by around one-tenth. Heidfeld was nearly half a second faster than new Sauber teammate Kamui Kobayashi in P14.

The gaps between the two Force India drivers and the two Renault pilots is also noteworthy – P3 Kubica was 1.2s faster than rookie teammate Vitaly Petrov, while Sutil in P4 had seven-tenths on his teammate in P16.

F1 timings (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.32.585s
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.32.633s
3. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1.33.129s
4. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.33.639s
5. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.33.643s
6. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.33.677s
7. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1.33.707s
8. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.33.739s
9. Nick Heidfeld (Sauber) 1.33.791s
10. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.33.831s
11. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.33.929s
12. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.34.042s
13. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.34.169s
14. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.34.271s
15. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.34.373s
16. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.34.379s
17. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.34.991s
18. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.35.684s
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.36.949s
20. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.37.329s
21. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.37.338s
22. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 1.37.778s
23. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1.38.814s
24. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1.39.443s

F1 Suzuka Blog – FP2 at Suzuka Circuit

As the cars line up in the pits for the second practice session of the Japanese Grand Prix weekend, Lewis Hamilton sits on the sidelines, rueing his F1 accident. The McLaren driver did serious damage to the front left corner of his car, and despite the best efforts of the team's mechanics, it is not yet in a driveable state.

Hamilton is under an inordinate amount of pressure to perform this weekend, and another points-free finish would see him out of the running for the drivers' title. As a result, the British driver – who is known for pushing the limits on track, a real fire in the belly racer – pushed too hard and may have scuppered his chances.

While lost running on Friday would not usually signal the end of a championship campaign, McLaren have really pushed the boat out on the development front, and the team needs to harvest as much data as possible in order to find that set-up sweet spot that could lead to victory on Sunday. Heavy rain is forecast for Saturday, and teams are hedging their bets that running in FP3 will be somewhat limited. As a result, lost time today could have a greater impact than usual on Saturday's qualifying session.

For the other drivers, however, Friday afternoon will be a ninety minute test of the cars' potential, with some teams learning new parts and some

drivers learning the circuit.

Unlike most practice sessions, FP2 saw timed laps begin nanoseconds after the pitlane opened, with the usual installation-tweak procedure abandoned. Scuderia Ferrari were particularly keen to show fans the true measure of the cars' potential, having spent the morning conducting endless tests that led to Fernando Alonso and Felipe Massa hiding the F10's true pace.

That pace became obvious ten minutes into the session, when the Spaniard took the top slot on the timesheets, setting a benchmark of 1.33.159s. But Ferrari's time at the top was cut short when the Red Bulls took to the track, and within ten minutes both Mark Webber and Sebastian Vettel have spent time in P1. Vettel's 1.32.210s, set on the softer tyre compound, sees him hold a lead of around two-tenths over his teammate.

With much shuffling up and down the order, it is clear that Red Bull are as likely to dominate here as they have been at nearly every other circuit this season. Alonso's best time is nearly a second slower than that set by Vettel, while McLaren's only operating driver Jenson Button is 1.3s off the pace. Hamilton's car is still in the pits, and he is the only man yet to appear on track this afternoon.

There are some indications that recent paddock rumours have motivated extra performance from those drivers whose F1 futures are said to be in jeopardy. Michael Schumacher has come under a lot of fire since Singapore, with chatter about his imminent departure reaching near-critical levels. But the formerly Red Baron outclassed his teammate this morning, and is currently sandwiched between Fernando Alonso and Robert Kubica in P7, 1.089s slower than Vettel. A second might be decades in F1 terms, but to be a second slower than the RB6 is an achievement nonetheless.

Vitaly Petrov, also the subject of recent criticism and seat-loss rumours, spent much of FP2 in P3, less than half a second off the Red Bulls' blistering pace. He has since been pushed down to P4 by Felipe Massa, another driver who has had to defend himself against accusations of a drop in performance. Massa is 0.6s faster than Ferrari's de facto number one, and the Brazilian will be keen to keep that margin if possible.

Adrian Sutil, one of the fastest men of the morning, continues to perform well this afternoon. Although currently in P6, his best time is nearly a second faster than his best run of the morning, a significant improvement and a clear demonstration of his potential this weekend.

The biggest surprise of the session thus far is Renault driver Robert Kubica, who is not only seven-tenths slower than teammate Petrov, but who also had a serious flirtation with the gravel at Dunlop. The Polish driver managed to keep his car going, but he is still running a few tenths slower than his best F1 time.

As the drivers all return to the pits for a move on to the softer tyre, lap times are sure to change. Petrov was the first man to set a quick lap on the options, and as the other drivers follow suit the Russian rookie is being pushed down the leaderboard, nearly a second shy of the two Red Bulls.

Kubica sees a dramatic improvement on the options, setting a 1.32.200s that puts him in P3, splitting the Red Bulls and the Ferraris, with Button in P6, eight-tenths slower than Vettel. The Red Bulls are racing each other: Webber was in P1 for the blink of an eye before Vettel posted a 1.31.712s, 0.148s faster than his teammate's option run. The lap record at Suzuka is 1.31.540s, set by Kimi Raikkonen in 2005. If the weather holds, one of the Red Bull drivers could take that record this weekend.

And Sebastian Vettel smashes it, with a 1.31.465s. The gap to Webber is now 0.395s, while the fastest non-RB6 is Robert Kubica's 1.32.200s, seven-tenths slower. Fernando Alonso is nine-tenths slower than Vettel, while Jenson Button – the only other WDC contender on track – needs to find another second if he wants to make an impact.

Lewis Hamilton is still in the pits, and with only twenty minutes of running time left today it is increasingly unlikely that he will be out on track this afternoon. McLaren are confident that the car will be fixed in time for Hamilton to get some running time in on both tyre compounds, but time is running out for the Woking outfit.

But McLaren are excellent at coping with adversity, and with less than ten minutes remaining of the session Hamilton's bright yellow helmet makes its first on-track appearance of the afternoon. It is unlikely that the British driver will be able to do in four or five laps what his rivals have managed in 25 to 30, but Hamilton's legendary determination could see a shake-up in the final minutes.

The McLaren driver's first lap sees him in P18, just over three seconds off the pace. With all of the other drivers – barring Rubens Barrichello, who is suffering engine trouble – out on track, traffic will be heavy as Hamilton tries to squeeze in anything up to five more timed laps in an attempt to get a feel for the ideal qualifying and race set up. His second timed lap sees no improvement, and it is likely to be an uncomfortable evening for the young driver as he attempts to overcome his disappointment at the day's outcome.

On his fifth timed run, Hamilton loses 1.1s in the second sector, although his 1.33.481s sees the McLaren driver move up to P13 seconds before the chequered flag falls, 2.016s off the pace of the Red Bulls and a second slower than his teammate.

And with that, the session comes to an end. As ever, making predictions on the strength of practice sessions is a fool's errand, and not worth attempting. Of interest, however, is the sustained presence in the top three of Robert Kubica, who would be a championship contender in a better car. The 0.05s gap between P8 and P11 could make Q2 very exciting tomorrow, as there are a number of cars with apparently similar pace all vying for a chance to play in the top ten shoot-out.

FP2 timings (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.31.465s
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.31.860s
3. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1.32.200s
4. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.32.362s
5. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.32.519s
6. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.32.533s
7. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.32.703s

8. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.32.831s
 9. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.32.842s
 10. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1.32.851s
 11. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.32.880s
 12. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.33.471s
 13. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.33.481s
 14. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.33.564s
 15. Nick Heidfeld (Sauber) 1.33.697s
 16. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.34.005s
 17. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.34.055s
 18. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.34.310s
 19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.36.095s
 20. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.36.333s
 21. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1.36.630s
 22. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.36.834s
 23. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1.37.352s
 24. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1.37.831s
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FI Suzuka Blog – FP3 at Suzuka Circuit

Soakzuka, more like. It has been raining non-stop since last night, but the downpour has become more of a torrent in the past hour. Now that FP3 is about to begin, rumours are flying that this afternoon's qualifying session will be postponed until Sunday morning, when the forecast is for better weather.

While universal declarations are often hard to make, one thing that can be said about FI fans around the world is that they are dedicated beyond belief. We have had heavy rains in Montreal, Spa, and now at Suzuka, but the fans just put up their umbrellas and carry on watching, even in the uncovered grandstands. Incidences of pneumonia are probably higher among FI fans than any other section of the global community.

As the drivers begin putting on their helmets and making final preparations for FP3, humidity is at 90 percent, while air and track temperatures are both 20 degrees. Not that track temperature is all that relevant right now – the amount of standing water on the newly green track has put paid to any notion of getting more speed from a particularly grippy set of tyres.

Conditions here are so precarious that the FIA sent the Safety Car out for a reconnaissance lap before allowing the practice session to begin. The track has been declared safe, but wet, and the majority of the teams are planning limited running in current conditions. The only real highlight of the rain this morning is the opportunity it affords to check out the varying aerodynamic packages through a careful study of each car's progress through the rain. And the rooster tails are pretty sweet, too.

Installation laps begin as the drivers gingerly begin to feel their way around the track. Depending on their findings, these installation laps could amount to the sum total of this morning's running here in Japan.

As the drivers come in from their installation laps, the reported findings are unsurprising to say the least. It's a day for extreme wets, the tyres are impossible to warm up, and sections of the track require boats, not cars. Turn 8 is a particular problem, but the track is still driveable. For now.

Twenty-three minutes into the session, and an eerie calm has fallen over Suzuka. There are no cars on track, and few of the drivers are wearing their race suits. Timo Glock and Jaime Alguersuari have both been out on track, spun off, and complained of aquaplaning. A swimsuit and inflatable armbands are probably the best attire in these conditions, even if they do violate FIA fire safety regulations.

Lewis Hamilton breaks the deathly calm with a careful lap. The McLaren driver has to make up for lost running time on Friday, despite the weather, and appears to be enjoying having the track to himself. Hamilton is good in the rain, and is the first man to begin what looks like a timed lap. His out lap was free of spins and associated trouble, but it is clear to see that he is wrestling to keep the car in line. And the timed lap ends with a trip to the pits, and no time on the board. Conditions are dreadful, and careful is the only possible course of action.

Toro Rosso get the first time on the board, courtesy of Jaime Alguersuari's 1.58.016s, nearly 30 seconds slower than the best times set in dry running on Friday. On the installation laps, the bulk of drivers took around a minute to complete the second sector, a dramatic increase on Friday's times. With his second timed lap, Alguersuari improves by just over two seconds, no mean feat in a swimming pool.

With just over twenty minutes remaining of the session, and heavy rains expected for at least twenty-five minutes, teams are beginning to declare their intentions of sitting out FP3 in the pits. The track is heavy with standing water, and there is nothing much to be gained from running right now, given the dry weather forecast for Sunday.

The Toro Rosso drivers are obviously made of sterner – foolhardier? – stuff than the rest, as Sebastian Buemi is the next man to brave the deteriorating conditions. There's no telling whether it will turn into a timed lap, but any running is an improvement on the endless video of rain falling on abandoned tarmac. Any safe running, that is.

And with that, Buemi aquaplanes over a slippery kerb and spins on track. Luckily, the young Spaniard is within easy reach of the pit entrance, and manages to avoid a messy trip into the gravel. Rather, he returns to the relative dry of the pits as the session clock continues to count down.

Undeterred by Buemi's near miss, Robert Kubica is the next man out on track, feeling his way around the circuit and sending up spumes of water. The Renault driver returns to the pits without setting a time, and the FIA video feed now consists of footage of a stream of water coursing along the racing line. Those postponed qualifying rumours could be bang on the money...

Despite teams joking about racing paper boats down the pitlane (where have we seen that before?), Hamilton has once more decided to brave the conditions, although he too returns to the pits before setting a time. Bravery or madness? Ross Brawn is convinced that qualifying will be postponed until tomorrow, and it would take a meteorological miracle to restore the track to safe conditions in the next couple of hours.

With less than two minutes remaining, the teams are beginning to call it quits and begin preparing the cars for qualifying, whenever that's likely to be. At the risk of sounding cliched, what a wash out.

FP3 times (unofficial)

With only two times on the board, it's hardly worth recording..

F1 Suzuka Blog – Fat lot of nothing (aka qualifying's off till tomorrow)

One could dedicate acres of newsprint to the fact that nothing at all happened in Suzuka this afternoon, but that would be a waste of your time and mine.

The paddock was – and continues to be – rain soaked, the hardy Japanese fans deserve an endurance medal for sitting it out, and the teams had a pitlane boat race (again).

Virgin made new friends by hosting a second sushi lunch, at which your faithful correspondent did not act like any sort of feeding pig. Thankfully I was not alone in having third, fourth, and fifth helpings of the food. When eating from a side plate, multiple portions of sushi and tempura really only add up to a small meal, right? There's no need to go into the tonkatsu and rice I had before the sushi appeared..

And sticking with the new team coverage, Lotus summed up the day best in their unparalleled press release, reproduced here in full:

After qualifying was postponed until Sunday in Japan due to the torrential rain, Lotus Racing has nothing to announce for the first time in several weeks.

Heikki Kovalainen (Chassis T127-01) "Nothing to say."

Jarno Trulli (Chassis T127-04) "Nothing to report."

Chief Technical Officer Mike Gascoyne: "Nothing from me."

Riad Asmat, Chief Executive Officer "Nothing from me either."

Qualifying is now scheduled to take place at 10am tomorrow morning, five hours before the race is due to start.

F1 Suzuka Blog – Q1 at Suzuka Circuit

At last, at last. Sunday in Japan dawned bright and sunny, with nary a sign of the torrential rains that had plagued Suzuka on Saturday and postponed qualifying.

The biggest loser on Saturday – strange as that might be, given the lack of running time for all concerned – was McLaren's Lewis Hamilton, who has a new gearbox and will now be dropped five places on this afternoon's grid, giving the Brit a best possible start position of P6. While Hamilton is never one to shy away from a challenge, the WDC is looking far from assured after a recent run of errors and bad luck.

As qualifying begins at last, the air temperature is 25 degrees, track temperature is 28 degrees and climbing, and humidity is relatively low. The recent torrents have rendered the track green, but that doesn't appear to have concerned the drivers, who immediately start lapping at similar times to those set in Friday morning's practice session.

Although the drivers have been circulating for a few minutes, the first bit of real action on track comes at the hands of Michael Schumacher and Fernando Alonso, who vie for track position as the Spanish driver prepares to start his first timed lap of the session.

At the mid-point, the two top slots are occupied by Williams boys Nico Hulkenberg and Rubens Barrichello. Hulkenberg is rumoured to be racing for his F1 future from now till the end of the season, and it appears that the much lauded rookie has found some added pace here in Japan. But in Q1 the real interest lies at the bottom of the timesheets, in the infamous dropout zone.

Virgin Racing are highly unlikely to improve on the P2 scored in FP3 – and ironically celebrated on the team's Saturday press release – but they are still in a head to head battle with Lotus to prove which is the best of the new teams.

With five minutes remaining of Q1, Red Bull's Sebastian Vettel is top of the pops, as has become standard in 2010 qualifying, with teammate Mark Webber in P4 wrapping the Williams boys in an RB6 sandwich. Despite his near total lack of running this weekend, Hamilton's best lap sees him only 0.02s shy of teammate Button; the 2008 champion needs to score pole if possible this morning, to limit the damage of his aforementioned grid penalty.

And down at the bottom of the list, the two Toro Rossos and both Force India drivers are those most at risk of dropping out with the new teams. Tonio Liuzzi and Adrian Sutil respond to the threat with marginally improved laps, but both men are still in P15 and P16 respectively, not entirely out of the danger zone.

As the chequered flag falls, the axe lands on Sebastian Buemi; he will be joining the new boys at the back of this afternoon's grid.

Dropout zone

18. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.33.568s
 19. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.35.346s
 20. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.35.464s
 21. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1.36.265s
 22. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.36.332s
 23. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1.37.270s
 24. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1.37.365s
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F1 Suzuka Blog – Q2 at Suzuka Circuit

And with the essentially unsurprising Q1 out of the way, it is time for Q2 to begin. The nanoseconds between sessions allow the media enough time to slurp down another cup of coffee – aka lifeblood – but not much else.

The two Mercedes drivers remain in the pits as all of the other Q2 contenders pile out onto the track, largely on the prime tyre compound. The track is now beginning to rubber in again, with heavy black streaks visible on the racing line.

In the early part of the session, the benchmark time of 1.31.651s belongs to Mark Webber, with Jenson Button just behind. The five WDC contenders occupy the top five slots on the timesheets, chased by the Williams pair, Robert Kubica, and Felipe Massa.

Sauber's Kamui Kobayashi, the homeboy hero, seems to have founded added pace from the crowds willing him on. When the drivers were announced this morning, Cowboyashi was the only man to elicit a real reception from the crowd, with claps, cheers, and the honking of a multitude of air horns. Fan support can be like an excellent bra, lifting beyond what nature originally intended.

But as the Mercedes drivers emerge from the pits to complete their own timed laps, Kobayashi is pushed down into the dropout zone, joining Felipe Massa, Vitaly Petrov, Adrian Sutil, Nick Heidfeld, Jaime Alguersuari, and Tonio Liuzzi. With five minutes until the chequered flag falls on Q2, there's still everything left to play for as the cars come into the pits for a change of rubber.

The two Ferraris are the first men out on track on soft rubber, and Massa appears to be buckling under his own pressure, fighting to keep control of the car around Turn 5. The Brazilian's first timed lap on fresh rubber is not good enough for Q3, so there could be desperate times ahead as the Paulistino tries to secure a place in the top ten.

With all eyes on the dropout zone, Sebastian Vettel displaces his teammate from the number one slot, as Lewis Hamilton jumps up to P3, pushing Jenson Button into P4.

Kobayashi is pushing and pushing for a slot in Q3, and runs an incredibly ragged flying lap, hitting every kerb along the way and appearing to be several feet beyond the limit. But he holds it together without incident, eliciting sighs of relief in the Sauber garage. The Japanese rookie needs to find an additional seven-tenths to make it to Q3, but having a car in one piece for the afternoon's race is more important.

And with the chequered flag fluttering merrily in the breeze, the dropout zone is confirmed. Massa's is the highest profile scalp; the Ferrari driver will start the race in P12, alongside Sauber's Nick Heidfeld in P11. Neither Force India made it into Q3, which will be made up of the five championship contenders, both Mercedes drivers, both Williams drivers, and Renault's Robert Kubica.

Dropout zone

11. Nick Heidfeld (Sauber) 1.32.187s
 12. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.32.321s
 13. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.32.422s
 14. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.32.427s
 15. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.32.659s
 16. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.33.071s
 17. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.33.154s
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F1 Suzuka Blog – Q3 at Suzuka Circuit

It's all to play for here at Suzuka. Q2 ended with the five challengers for the World Drivers' Championship lined up in the top five slots, and every millimetre of advantage now has added weight in the championship campaign.

Lewis Hamilton begins the session with a five-place disadvantage; thanks to a new gearbox the Brit's best hope for this afternoon is to line up in P6. Accordingly, he is the first man out on track, keen to get in as many laps as possible to secure that elusive pre-penalty pole. As the McLaren driver begins the first timed lap of Q3, the shoot-out is officially underway.

Hamilton crosses the line in 1.31.320s, closely followed by Fernando Alonso who slots in behind with a 1.31.411s. Both Red Bulls are out on track, and the assembled crowds hold their breath to see what the RB6 can deliver in real qualifying trim. Mark Webber's 1.31.185s sees him best Hamilton, but Sebastian Vettel takes them both with a 1.30.792s.

With four minutes until the chequered flag falls, only Jenson Button and Nico Hulkenberg have yet to put times on the board. Everyone else is in the pits for new tyres, giving them the track to themselves for their first timed runs.

Button's first effort sees him cross the line in P4, 0.05s slower than his teammate. Hulkenberg, meanwhile, posts a 1.31.559s, putting him in P6 and pushing Michael Schumacher into P10. All ten contenders are now out on track, with just over a minute remaining of qualifying here in Japan.

Hamilton is pushing hard, and he crosses the line in P2 with a 1.31.169s. But pace setter Sebastian Vettel is on a real flyer, and likely to score his umpteenth pole of the season. Before Vettel crosses the line, Hamilton is pushed into P3 by Mark Webber's 1.30.853s, but that is trumped by Vettel, who scores an almost certain pole with a 1.30.785s

Robert Kubica is on a late charge for pole, and crosses the line in P4 on his final lap. But Hamilton's penalty sees the Renault driver promoted to P3, leaving the top of the grid looking eerily similar to the Friday practice results.

Provisional grid (unofficial but including known penalties)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.30.785s
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.30.853s
3. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1.31.231s
4. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.31.352s
5. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.31.378s
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.31.494s
7. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.31.535s
8. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.31.169s*
9. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1.31.559s
10. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.31.841s
11. Nick Heidfeld (Sauber) 1.32.187s
12. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.32.321s
13. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.32.422s
14. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.32.427s
15. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.32.659s
16. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.33.071s
17. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.33.154s
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20. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.35.464s
21. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1.36.265s
22. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.36.332s
23. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1.37.270s
24. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1.37.365s

* Lewis Hamilton qualified in P3, but will start from P8 thanks to a new gearbox and five-place grid penalty.

F1 Suzuka Blog – The Japanese Grand Prix as it happened

In one of the most ignominious starts in recent Grand Prix memory, Lucas di Grassi totalled his car on the way to the grid, parking it in the wall of I30R. That's the Virgin driver's race weekend over already. Oops.

As a result of di Grassi's snafu, twenty-three men are preparing themselves to race at one of the F1 world's favourite circuits. But despite the Brazilian's premature departure, the start order will remain unchanged.

But di Grassi is not the only man to have an unfortunate weekend here in Suzuka. McLaren driver Lewis Hamilton has a catalogue of woes, starting with a crash early in FP1, limited running in FP2, the Saturday rains that led to limited running for the entire grid, a five-place grid penalty, and now an ear infection.

Some members of the F1 media are adding the bubble car he was given for the drivers' parade to that list, but I think it was a great move – in amongst all the classic Ferraris and Rollers, Hamilton's bright red bubble car was the only one people will remember in the days to come.

With only seconds to go before the race begins, track temperature is 36 degrees, air temperature is 27 degrees, and the chance of rain is slim to none, the threatened showers having burned themselves out elsewhere.

Of the ten men who made it through to Q3, Jenson Button was the only man to gamble on the prime tyre compound. McLaren hope he will outlast the competition and secure a podium from his P5 start, but the option tyre has been very durable this season, and Button will probably have to pull out a lead on old rubber just as the competition are getting faster thanks to a combination of fresh tyres and falling fuel loads. With the end of the season now in sight, it's all to play for this afternoon.

And they're off!

What a start. Petrov crashes going into the first corner, clipping Nico Hulkenberg, who then pushes into Felipe Massa. The Brazilian then carries momentum into the side of Tonio Liuzzi's car, and that's four men out – and the Safety Car on track – in the first lap.

The mid-field pile into the pits behind the Safety car, but none of the front runners follow them in. Had they done so, Button's tyre gamble would have been rendered irrelevant in the first few seconds of the race.

Sakon Yamamoto goes purple behind the Safety Car, something that would be a rule broken for any other driver, but is almost certainly a career high for the HRT pilot. But Yamamoto is not alone – Heikki Kovalainen and Jarno Trulli have also gone purple behind the Safety Car, something of a new team special.

And behind the Safety Car, P2 Robert Kubica pulls over, his race finished. The Polish driver lost a wheel, and did well to keep the car under control until he found a safe point at which to pull off. This race is chaos, and it's only just begun.

Thanks to Kubica's retirement, the five championship contenders occupy the first five slots on the leaderboard, a sight that's become quite familiar in the past fortnight...

Di Grassi aside, as he didn't even start the race, none of the retirements have involved a driver from a new team. An impressive feat when you consider that 25 percent of the grid is already back in the hospitality suites.

And on lap 7, the Safety Car heads into the pits, meaning that racing can begin in earnest. What further chaos does the land of the rising sun have in store?

Michael Schumacher makes a move on Rubens Barrichello, overtaking the Brazilian for P6. Next up is Lewis Hamilton, 2.2s ahead. Hamilton is 0.4s behind teammate Jenson Button, and the question on everyone's lips is will they hold position or will Lewis attempt a possibly risky overtake for the lead? Team orders only cost \$100,000, chump change to an F1 team, so it's anyone's guess.

It would be in the team's best interest to get Hamilton ahead of his teammate. Button is the only front runner currently on the prime tyre, and he is considerably slower than the cars ahead. The longer Hamilton stays behind, the greater lead Fernando Alonso will have pulled out on both McLarens – the Red Bulls are so much faster that they're barely worth considering, whereas the F10 is theoretically within reach. Button's strategy relies on outlasting the competition and building up a lead during the pitstop phase, so if Hamilton gets ahead now it will allow McLaren to spread their bets in strategic terms.

Lap 14 sees Kamui Kobayashi pull off a kamikaze overtaking manoeuvre on Jaime Alguersuari. The two touch, but Cowboyashi thrills the home crowd by making the move stick, and his new P10 position sees both Saubers in the points.

Four laps later, and it's Adrian Sutil's turn to be blown away by the Japanese cowboy. Sutil tries to reclaim P9, but Kobayashi ably fends him off and pulls away. The first overtake caused apparent front wing damage to Sutil's car, and the Force India driver pits at the end of lap 18 as the Sauber man powers away down the pit straight.

The stewards have announced that the Hulkenberg-Petrov collision off the start – the first in a domino chain of crashes that led to a lap 1 Safety Car – will be investigated after the race. As both of the drivers concerned retired as a result of the incident, time penalties are off the list of potential punishments. The Massa-Liuzzi crash is also going to be investigated post-race.

Rubens Barrichello pits for fresh tyres on lap 20, the first man in the top ten to do so. On lap 21 Jaime Alguersuari follows his lead from P9, but the championship contenders should be charging on for a few more laps yet.

Hamilton proves me wrong, pitting for fresh rubber on lap 22. Button is finally lapping at a similar pace to Alonso, and the McLaren pit wall appear to have decided that the advantage on the prime tyres will come from having properly warmed up rubber when the men ahead pit, giving the McLaren pair a chance to catch up, or even overtake.

And on lap 25, Vettel and Alonso pit together. Vettel comes out ahead in that private race, and Alonso manages to come out ahead of Hamilton, who is charging down the pit straight in Kobayashi's wake. The McLaren overtakes the Sauber in a hairy manoeuvre, and Jenson Button inherits the lead from Webber when the Australian pits. Button will be doing his damndest to build up enough of the lead to pit later and rejoin in P1, but with the Red Bulls only 3.5s behind and much faster, it will be a challenging task indeed for the Frome Flyer.

On lap 27 Hamilton goes purple as the two Mercedes go head to head, fighting for P8. Rosberg's pit strategy put him ahead of his teammate, and Schumacher is desperate to reclaim the advantage on track. This is a fight that will run and run.

With Buemi's pit stop the two Mercedes move up to P7 and P8. Should they manage to hunt down Kobayashi, nearly 10s ahead of them on track, the Sauber driver will make it as hard as possible for either man to pass. Schumacher's best chance of leapfrogging his teammate is likely to come then, as Rosberg attempts to get past Kobayashi, presuming they get there before he pits. Say what you will about the Sauber rookie, but he is certainly no pushover.

Up in front, the Red Bulls are closing the gap on Jenson Button. Should the current world champion pit under these conditions, he will reappear on track behind his teammate, scuppering his championship chances. A podium finish for Button is looking increasingly unlikely by the lap.

Hamilton is gaining on Alonso, but still four seconds behind, while the four championship contenders are getting ever closer to Button. The Brit needs to pit, and pit soon, as the race leader is slowing with every lap. Gambles don't always pay off, and McLaren are likely to get a better result from Hamilton than Button this weekend, despite the former's grid penalty.

Lewis has just gone purple in the first sector, the part of the track that the Red Bulls have made their own this weekend. If he is able to string together a perfect lap here, the Brit could go purple for the first time this race. And he does it, further hammering home the need to call his teammate into the pits. Unless McLaren's master strategy involves using Button to slow down the cars behind, giving Hamilton the opportunity to gain on them all for a possible podium, that is...

Heikki Kovalainen, Kamui Kobayashi, and Jenson Button are the only cars running yet to pit. But on lap 37 the Lotus driver comes in. As he prepares to leave the pits, the Finnish driver has to avoid an errant marshal, who is inexplicably dawdling in the middle of the pitlane.

Less than 10 seconds separate the five championship contenders, with P6 Kobayashi 19 seconds behind. If Button were to pit now there's a chance he would reappear in P7, essentially ending his championship hopes this year.

And on lap 38, the McLaren mechanics are in the pits, ready for Button. Pitting from the lead, he's back out in P5, ahead of Kobayashi but 8.5s behind teammate Hamilton. Kobayashi pits soon after, and re-emerges in P12, out of the points and behind Nick Heidfeld. Button's tyre gamble didn't pay off, but it wasn't a total failure either – should the race finish in this order, he would add ten points to his WDC haul, making him fifth of the five challengers.

On his first lap on fresh rubber Button goes purple, taking advantage of the option compound and stretch of clean air to really let loose and make the most of the circuit.

If Red Bull were practicing team orders and asked Vettel to give the lead to Webber, the Australian's championship campaign would be strengthened by a 21 point lead over Alonso. As things stand, however, Webber is likely to leave Japan with a 14 point lead over both Alonso (2nd) and Vettel (3rd), thanks to the way the standings are calculated.

The points difference between Vettel and Webber may be minor, but with Alonso having the full support of his team, the time is soon approaching when it will disadvantage McLaren and Red Bull's title hopes if both teams decide to play fair all the way to the chequered flag at Yas Marina. Self-worth or victory – which matters more?

Button has made good use of his fresh rubber over the past few laps, eating away at the gap to Hamilton until the two cars are lapping practically side by side, split by 0.6s. And on lap 44 Button takes the lead, overtaking his teammate as Hamilton appears to be taking a brief nap. Or suffering from technical issues. Either way, Button was let past without a fight, and Hamilton's best hope from the weekend is a haul of only 10 points. Still an improvement on the past two races, mind.

It's all happening on lap 45, as Kobayashi overtakes Alguersuari, damaging the latter's right front wing and sending the Spaniard into the pits. Moments later Sutil's engine blows, and Force India lose both drivers and any chance at the points. There's no doubt that Kobayashi is putting on a real show for the home crowd this afternoon, making the one championship point he will get from P10 almost immaterial.

Ahead of Hamilton, Button goes purple again in P4, despite having little to no chance of catching up to P3 Alonso, 12.2s ahead with only six laps remaining.

And with five laps to go, Rosberg goes BANG! Out of the race and into the tyre wall, spinning like mad off Dunlop and promoting Schumacher to P6.

Kobayashi is fast approaching Heidfeld, and it's a teammate battle for P7 with only 0.2s splitting the two men. Heidfeld briefly holds him off, but Kobayashi takes the lead to a round of rapturous applause from the press room. If this is how he drives in front of a home crowd, I vote that every race in 2011 happens at Suzuka, with a couple of brief forays to Spa, Monza, and Silverstone.

And with three remarkably quiet final laps, Sebastian Vettel takes the chequered flag, followed by Mark Webber and Fernando Alonso. Webber retains the lead of the WDC, with Alonso in P2, Vettel in P3, Hamilton in P4, and Button in P5.

Race result

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1h30.27.323s
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) +0.095s
3. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) +2.721s
4. Jenson Button (McLaren) +13.522s
5. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) + 39.595s
6. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) +59.993s
7. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) +1.04.038s
8. Nick Heidfeld (Sauber) +1.09.648s
9. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) +1.10.846s
10. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) +1.12.806s
11. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) + 1 lap
12. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) + 1 lap
13. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) + 2 laps
14. Timo Glock (Virgin) + 2 laps
15. Bruno Senna (HRT) + 2 laps
16. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) + 3 laps
17. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) DNF

Not classified

Adrian Sutil (Force India) RET
Robert Kubica (Renault) RET

Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) RET

Felipe Massa (Ferrari) RET

Vitaly Petrov (Renault) RET

Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) RET

Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) DNS
