
This race was another job share, although I only handed over responsibility for FP1 and FP2. You can see the rest of my coverage (barring the post-race announcements of penalties for McLaren's Lewis Hamilton and Ferrari's Fernando Alonso).

Getting to know Sepang

You might think you know all there is to know about Sepang. And given that we've raced there since 1999, you might be right.

But what of DRS and KERS, and the changes the two devices are likely to wring once used in conjunction for the first time at a circuit that's got more straights than you can shake a stick at?

While the Australian Grand Prix was the first time the DRS was used in a racing situation, the device did not deliver the overtaking many had hoped to see. But Albert Park's Turn 1 has never been a prime overtaking spot, and it is likely that the DRS will be more effective in Malaysia, depending on the zone defined by the FIA.

While it goes without saying that the circuit characteristics will have their own part to play in determining the outcome of Sunday's race, it is also important to remember that the weather in Sepang can define the weekend. Thanks to the time difference and European TV scheduling, the Malaysian Grand Prix takes place at monsoon o'clock, and the heavy rains have been known to affect qualifying, the race distance run, and the track surface.

Every race track improves over the course of a grand prix weekend, as even those circuits in regular use throughout the year are not permanently rubbered in. Friday's green track matures as rubber is laid down by practice and qualifying sessions and a host of support races, and by Sunday – in theory – the racing line should see maximum grip and maximum speeds.

But in Sepang the usual rules do not apply. While not every race is a total washout, it takes a long memory to find a Malaysian Grand Prix that has not been affected by rain at some point over the course of the weekend (long enough to stretch back to 2008, anyway). The 2010 event was notable for the first qualifying session, in which McLaren and Ferrari made the wrong weather calls and sat in their garages during the few dry minutes at the beginning of the session. As a result, Lewis Hamilton, Fernando Alonso, and Felipe Massa were all out in Q1, shocking the paddock and watching fans.

Should the sun decide to shine all weekend, the weather will not be any easier for the drivers. Malaysia is a hot and humid tropical country, and as a result the track is one of the most physically demanding on the F1 calendar. Drivers need to be in peak condition – both body and mind – to be able to pilot their car in extreme temperatures for over 300kms.

The heat will also be tough on tyres, and the new Pirelli rubber will be under the microscope from the minute the first car leaves the pitlane on Friday morning. If the usual afternoon monsoon breaks every day – even if it only lasts for a few minutes at a time – the track will lose its build-up of rubber and revert to its virginal green state. A rubber-free track chews up the tyres more rapidly than one that has bedded in.

But even if the entire weekend remains dry as a bone, the track temperatures at Sepang tend to average out around 43°C, twice as hot as the temperatures clocked at the previous race in Melbourne. During winter testing the Spanish tracks never reached the mid-40s, but the warmer circuits led to higher levels of – and more rapid – degradation than we have seen so far. It is highly likely that Sepang will see extreme levels of tyre degradation, and Pirelli motorsport director Paul Hembery has already warned that he expects to see between three and four pit stops per driver.

Should Sepang bring about a return of the 'supermarbles' we saw in Barcelona last month – chunks of rubber the size of an adult fist – then the twin devices of KERS and the DRS might not contribute to as much overtaking as we'd like. With huge chunks of rubber off the racing line, anyone considering an overtaking manoeuvre is going to have to balance the possible advantage with the extreme loss of grip on the marbles.

But if the tyres behave themselves and marbling remains at 2010 levels, then overtaking should be more plentiful than it was in Melbourne. With a number of fast cars qualifying out of position, last year's race was a treat in terms of balls-to-the-wall manoeuvres. Thanks to the combination of twin straights joined by a hairpin, high turn angles, and a variety of corners with differing speed profiles, Sepang is one of the few Tilkedromes where overtaking is a real possibility, even without devices designed to assist drivers.

With those devices added to the cars and working well, it is likely that Sunday's race will not be a procession, but rather a feast for the fans.

The track is one that punishes understeer, and that could be a deciding factor in Saturday's qualifying session and Sunday's grid. Those men who prefer a bit of oversteer in their cars will be going into the weekend with a slight advantage.

The current configuration of the Sepang International Circuit has been in use since 2000, and measures 5.543km. Presuming that the typical torrential rains do not bring an early end to the grand prix – as happened in 2009 – the race will last for 56 laps, bringing the total distance run to 310.408 kilometres.

The group of past Sepang winners currently racing in F1 is a relatively small one: Sebastian Vettel (2010), Jenson Button (2009), Fernando Alonso

(2005, 2007), and Michael Schumacher (2000, 2001, 2004).

But the group of previous pole sitters is only slightly larger: Mark Webber (2010), Jenson Button (2009), Felipe Massa (2007, 2008), Fernando Alonso (2003, 2005), and Michael Schumacher (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004). As for fastest laps, those have been claimed by Mark Webber (2010), Jenson Button (2009), Nick Heidfeld (2008), Lewis Hamilton (2007), Fernando Alonso (2006), and Michael Schumacher (1999, 2003).

The current lap record at Sepang is Juan Pablo Montoya's 2004 time of 1.34.223s, set at an average speed of 211.783kph.

F1 Sofa Blog – Thursday press conference in Sepang

The first press conference of the Malaysian Grand Prix weekend took place on Thursday afternoon at the Sepang International Circuit, and featured drivers Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso), Jenson Button (McLaren), Felipe Massa (Ferrari), Nico Rosberg (Mercedes), and Jarno Trulli (Lotus).

One of the first questions asked was about the battle between Button and Massa during the Australian Grand Prix; both drivers were asked to give their account of the situation as it unfolded on track

“Looking back on it now, I would say it was a pretty fun battle to be involved with,” Button said. “Frustrating for me, as I couldn't find a way past. I think Felipe did a very good job of blocking and I couldn't find a way past. So, it was frustrating but when you look at it now, it looks like a good race, I would say. But even with the DRS it is still very tricky to overtake at a place like Melbourne with such short straights. If you cover the inside line it is very difficult to overtake.”

Massa agreed. “What Jenson said is what I think as well,” he said. “I was able to fight very hard, to keep him behind but it was not easy. I think in some places where he was very quick on the straights I was able to use very well the KERS, not to allow him to pass me completely on the straight and to keep on the inside line. Not just the main straight, but also in other corners. Then he passed me on the wrong side, so he was penalised. I expect him, to be honest, to give back the position. Two corners after Fernando [Alonso] passed me and it was a little bit more difficult for him to give back the position. I think it was a nice fight.”

Looking back to the Australian weekend, Rosberg acknowledged that it wasn't a great success for Mercedes, while Buemi was very pleased to have made it through to Q3 and scored some points in Sunday's race.

“Australia was not a good start for us,” Rosberg said. “But there were a few issues in Australia, especially reliability, which we didn't get right throughout the weekend so that really hurt us. Also set-up wise, and that is mechanical, aerodynamic, everything, we just did not seem to find the right path on that, so a lot of effort has gone into making things better. We are a really strong team so we will get there.”

Massa is another man looking for a better result this weekend. “For sure, we didn't have the pace we expected in Australia and last week and this week we've been analysing the direction which we should start here,” the Ferrari driver said. “My hope is that we're going to have a different car, a more competitive car, in qualifying, where we saw a big difference compared to Red Bull and in the race as well. It's also true that I was a little bit too aggressive on the set-up and my degradation was a little bit higher than I expected, so that is also another point to think about for this track where we see very high temperatures as well, so we need to change the direction on set-up a little bit, just for the tyres as well.

“Yes, sure, confident that we can have a better weekend,” Massa continued. “The first race was not great for us, we didn't have the result we expected but I don't think it was just due to the tyres. I think we expected better speed but anyway, I'm confident that we can get everything together here.”

Joining Massa and Rosberg on the hunt for better results is Lotus driver Jarno Trulli. “I think we need to get the best out of the car, which we didn't in Australia, and be part of the midfield, as I believe the wintertime testing showed our good pace but actually we struggled quite a lot in Australia,” he said. “We had several troubles with radiator, power steering, so we didn't get the best out of the car, which we want to do here. We have got some fixes, several updates on the car, so we hope to get right into the tight midfield battle and let's see then. It is very important first of all that we fix the problems and we show that we are really close to the others.”

In contrast, Buemi was thrilled to bits with his Australian race weekend. “I am really happy,” the Toro Rosso driver said. “I think we did the maximum in the qualifying. I don't think we could have done better. Then in the race, three points, with the disqualification of the Saubers we got another three points which is always welcome. I think it was a perfect start for us. Now we need to continue to push. As we see the midfield is pretty tight, so we will see what we can achieve here but the objective will be to be back in the points, definitely.”

As usual, the drivers were asked to look back on past years at the circuit while describing its characteristics as seen from the cockpit.

Sepang “is definitely a track I really enjoy,” Rosberg said. “Just the characteristics, really. There is a bit of everything here and also I have some great memories. I led my first race here, finished third last year in a Mercedes so it is always nice to come back here.”

Massa agreed, and pointed out that his best Malaysian results have come when he hasn't qualified in the front of the pack. “It's a track I enjoy so I've twice started on pole here and it's true that in the race the results have not been great compared to qualifying,” he said. “Last year was the opposite. I was almost last in qualifying, on the grid, because it was raining. We went out at the wrong time so we qualified in Q1, but I drove a very good race and finished seventh, so I hope this time qualifying and race together will be a little bit better. We concentrate on doing a good job.”

Button also has good memories of Sepang. “I always enjoy coming here,” the McLaren driver said. “This is one of those circuits that really makes me smile when I land into Malaysia, as it is a very flowing circuit. I have had some pretty good races here in the past, not just the one that I won but also other races where I haven't been on the podium but have had great races with people around here. It is one of those circuits where you can really have a good tussle as corners flow into each other.”

Unsurprisingly, tyres were a major talking point.

Button spoke of the likely effect of the scorching temperatures on the Pirelli rubber. Sepang is “a lot hotter,” the British driver said. “It’s a very tough circuit for the cars, for the drivers but especially for the four things that are touching the road, the tyres. I think we are going to see a very different race, mostly because of the tyres in the hot temperatures. I think there will possibly be more degradation. I think we’re all surprised at how consistent the tyres were at the first race. I don’t think that was the initial idea with the Pirelli tyres, to be so consistent. We saw a one stop from [Sergio] Pérez, which was obviously the highlight of the race for a lot of people and how he was able to be so consistent, but I don’t think it’s going to be the same here. I think it will be very different, it’s a lot more demanding and a lot tougher on the tyres. It brings another element into it which is good, I think.”

Meanwhile, Trulli was asked to defend a column he wrote that was critical of the performance of the Pirellis in Melbourne.

“I think that came from a completely wrong translation,” the Lotus driver said. “I actually said that Pirelli did a very good job for Australia. We didn’t expect to have problem with the tyre warming up, but actually we didn’t have degradation. I think one driver did a one-stop strategy, which, during the winter testing, was completely out of mind. For the Australian Grand Prix the tyres behaved completely different and extremely well for the experience we had during the winter testing. The only thing that I pointed out is that some people struggled for tyre warm-up, which was the case for several drivers. This showed that we still have a lot to learn, from a drivers and teams point of view, of the Pirelli tyres but as well Pirelli is trying to adjust themselves and trying to give us the best possible option for condition, weather, circuit...”

Another major talking point was the use of KERS, and the possible effect of the system on the already quick Red Bulls. Drivers were asked whether they thought a KERS-laden RB7 would kill the championship, and all agreed it was far too early to be speaking in those terms.

“I think that’s a little bit early to kill the championship, no?,” Massa asked. “Anyway, it’s always difficult to speak about a different car,” he continued. “For sure, in our car, if you don’t use KERS, you lose a little bit of lap time, so maybe it’s the same for Red Bull, so maybe they will improve even more, but it’s very difficult really to express how much they will improve or not because you don’t have a clear picture of the Red Bull car. But anyway, in my opinion, if you use KERS, it can be better.”

Button and Rosberg agreed that it was hard to make definitive comments about a rival’s car.

“I think we have a very good system and I don’t know what Red Bull’s system is like,” the Briton said. “Everybody has a different system in Formula 1, a different KERS hybrid system so maybe it gives them a lot of time, maybe it doesn’t, I don’t know. I don’t know what the benefits are for them. And then there’s always reliability, isn’t there, with a new system? I’m sure that’s one of the reasons why they didn’t use it in Melbourne and if they use it here, it’s obviously a very new system so there’s always reliability issues, so I’m sure they’re weighing up whether it’s worth it or not.”

The Mercedes driver agreed. “Well, for us, we don’t even really know at the moment where we are compared to other teams, so we’re going to concentrate on getting the best out of what we have and then we can start to think about where other teams are and what they’re doing,” Rosberg said.

Finally, Button talked about the drag reduction system, which is widely expected to be more effective in Malaysia than it was in Australia.

“I think with the DRS system it is going to make overtaking a lot easier than it was in Melbourne,” the British driver said. “Maybe it will be a little too easy, as I think being within a second before the last corner, even without DRS, you can have a good chance of overtaking. I don’t know, we’ll see.”

F1 Sofa Blog – Components, upgrades, and aero packages in Sepang

Another race, another set of new parts for the teams to test. As usual, teams have offered only the bare minimum when it comes to informing the media – and their opponents – about the new bits and bobs running this weekend.

Red Bull’s biggest upgrade, if you can call it that, was their KERS device, which the team ran in Friday’s practice sessions. The team has yet to decide whether or not they will run KERS in qualifying and during the race, but there were no apparent reliability problems on Friday so the signs are positive.

Ferrari spent the day running aerodynamic tests; the Italian team has brought a range of planned aerodynamic upgrades to Sepang. Speaking in the Scuderia’s race preview, Pat Fry said “after analysing qualifying and race data from Melbourne, there are already things we plan to change and improve for Malaysia. These will be added in to an already busy preplanned test programme with further aerodynamic updates that were always planned for this race. But we have also added a further three or four test items and probably there will be even more new parts to test arriving in the few days between the Malaysia and China races. It’s a case of constant development throughout the season.”

I don’t know if you could class it as an upgrade, but Renault is running with one sparkly new piece of kit – gold race suits for the drivers, designed to keep them cool in Sepang’s tropical heat. Speaking in the team’s pre-race preview, technical director James Allison said “I don’t want to be too specific – you know how paranoid we engineers are in this business – but I can say that we will bring a moderate upgrade package to Malaysia worth several tenths of a second. We will be making changes to the front and rear wing in addition to several items of bodywork.”

Williams were running with a new front wing on Friday, and much of the day’s running was given over to evaluation runs. The morning was spent testing KERS, but the team saw a recurrence of the electrical problems that plagued them in pre-season testing. In the team’s Malaysia preview, technical director Sam Michael said “we have some aero upgrades for the front end of the FW33 that we will be bringing to Malaysia, while we will also have some improvements on the KERS together with solutions for the transmission issues we experienced in Melbourne.”

Over at Sauber, technical director James Key admitted to “some updates with some new bodywork at the rear and some new brake duct developments.”

HRT are running a new nose cone and front wing. The parts were supposed to run in Australia, but did not pass the requisite FIA crash tests. As a result, the team ran in Melbourne with some 2010 components on the car, leading to their general lack of pace. The F111 has now been fitted with its 2011-spec components, and the team is confident that they will see improved running in Malaysia as a result.

According to Virgin team principal John Booth, his team is currently harvesting data to assist future upgrades. "This round of long-haul races means there are few developments we can bring to the car until the next significant upgrade for Turkey," he said. "Our focus for now is on gathering as much data as possible to plough back into the development cycle to ensure we can go on to make those bigger steps through the season."

McLaren, Mercedes, Force India, Toro Rosso, and Lotus were tight-lipped about upgrades this weekend.

F1 Sofa Blog – Friday press conference in Sepang

Present were team principals Eric Boullier (Renault), Ross Brawn (Mercedes), Christian Horner (Red Bull), Colin Kolles (HRT), Monisha Kaltenborn (Sauber), and Pirelli motorsport director Paul Hembery.

HRT effectively had their first real running of the season in Malaysia on Friday, and Kolles faced a number of questions about the team's problems and progress.

"This was our first test day basically," Kolles said. "I think we made some progress and we will make tomorrow some progress. I think it was not too bad, we have no major issues, it is just a matter to find some set-up."

The HRT team principal admitted it had been a challenging start to the year, but said that he was focused on the future. "I am not a person who is making a big issue out of this," Kolles said. "We are here. We worked hard in December and in January and February and we have to improve, that's the point. If I look backwards and I go into a corner and start to cry, nobody will help me. It is past and we have to move forward."

Unsurprisingly, Horner was asked about Red Bull's front wing. Even less surprisingly, the RBR team principal appeared to be bored to tears with questions about the legality of his cars.

"There's been so much said about the front wing that I probably don't need to add to it in this forum," Horner said. "I think that, at the end of the day, our car conforms with the regulations. We're very happy with that. We run the car, set-up-wise, slightly differently. We run a bit more rake in the car when, inevitably, you run the rear a bit higher, the front a bit lower and you end up, potentially with a visual difference. That's the way it is. The car complies with the regs. The FIA is happy with that and we're obviously very comfortable with that."

The other team principals were asked to weigh in on the subject of Red Bull's front wing. The general feeling was that if it complies with the FIA's regulations under testing, then there is not much to be said.

Renault team principal Eric Boullier said "there is a regulation in place, there are some tests done by the FIA, especially regarding the flexibility of the bodywork parts and if Red Bull is complying with the rule then there is nothing much to say. Back to the question: again it's a philosophy. As Christian said, they are running a different set-up with more rake and we also went a different way, with a different philosophy, so we keep an eye on them, obviously, because you also look at the fastest cars on the track, especially when it's constantly fastest."

Kolles was concentrating on his own team's issues, he said. "I think I have little bit different issues than the Red Bull's front wing at the moment. I'm focusing more on my issues."

Sauber's Monisha Kaltenborn agreed. "We, of course, we had another issue we had to sort out regarding wings, so we focused on that and not Red Bull's front wing," she said. "Red Bull's car has been checked, and if the FIA think it is legal, it is alright. We will keep on looking at it, of course, Red Bull knows that, but I think we should focus more on our own car than looking at other cars that much."

Ross Brawn had the biggest contribution to make to the discussion.

"There's a regulation which says that the bodywork should be rigid," the Mercedes team principal explained. "We all know that's impossible because everything moves. It's a question of degrees, so the FIA has a series of tests to measure the degree to which bodywork moves and as long as you pass those tests then your car is to all intents and purposes legal. Those tests can change, in fact they changed over the winter because, as they do in a lot of areas, the FIA try and improve those tests. There's a new test this year. Red Bull obviously pass it so that's all there is to say about it. They've got a philosophy of their car and approach and teams have got to decide if that's the reason – or one of the reasons – for their level of performance. If it is, then you need to consider going that route yourself, or make sure it's not an excuse for the fact they're winning everything at the moment. It's a philosophy. It ties in a lot with the whole car concept. It's fair to say that probably, over the winter, a lot of teams assumed with the new test that the situation was going to change and it hasn't so we're faced with what we have and we have to make sure we produce as competitive a car as we can and comply to the FIA tests."

Following the impressive morning margin between Mark Webber and the rest of the field, Red Bull's seemingly unassailable pace was one of the topics covered.

"You cannot read too much into that [margin]," Horner said. "Different people are running to different programmes. There was even a margin between our two cars. As we saw in the afternoon certainly the McLarens look competitive and Mercedes not too far away. I don't think Ferrari have shown their full hand yet, so very difficult to draw too many conclusions, but in terms of our own performance it has been a productive Friday."

Despite Horner's comments, Brawn acknowledged that Mercedes had a battle ahead of them before they would be able to match Red Bull on pace.

"I think we have got a little while to go before we can certainly trouble RBR," Brawn said. "We have got lots happening. There are some things we still

need to understand and obviously running the car consistently as we did today means we can get a better understanding. I think the warmer weather, the different conditions with the tyres, is presenting some new problems that we have got to get our heads around compared to what we saw in Barcelona so we need to make some progress but it looks a lot better than what we had in Melbourne.”

Red Bull's use of KERS – and the potential threat of added speed for the team – was also the subject of comment, with Horner asked to elaborate on his team's package.

“In Australia we ran the system on the Friday,” Horner said. “We felt that there was a potential reliability risk and the benefit of KERS in Australia is arguably less than (at) other venues, so we decided not to take that risk and remove the system from both cars on Friday evening, with a view to running the system here again, which we've done today. The system has run well and obviously reliably, so a decision will be made on it no doubt later this evening.

“It's a system that has commonality with Renault,” the Red Bull boss continued. “It's been designed in conjunction with them. Obviously, the installation of the system tends to be more personalised to each team, but there's a great deal of commonality, certainly between the two Renault-powered teams that are running KERS.”

Given that Hembery was at the press conference, it is hardly surprising that tyres were a popular topic of discussion.

Asked how he felt things had gone on Friday, Hembery replied: “Well, from our point of view it is almost early days. It is right we got more degradation here and there is quite a big difference between the soft and the hard, probably a second in the absolute times, so the teams are probably working out their strategies now based on that. I am guessing on a three-stop strategy, but we were surprised obviously in Melbourne with a one-stop which we certainly could not have envisaged beforehand. But three would appear from what we have seen so far today to be probably the most likely scenario.

“The softer [tyre] grains a lot,” Hembery added. “I think that was quite clear. Everyone was doing a quick lap and then some people were backing off trying to see if it would come back. They are looking at about eight to nine laps from the data I have seen briefly.”

Pirelli brought a new hard tyre compound to Sepang for teams to test, and Hembery was questioned about it.

“Well, we only had a limited running this morning with [the harder tyre],” Hembery said. “I think there was a comment they were 'slower and warmer, less degradation'. They are a generation of product that goes towards, I guess, something that won't degrade at a different level. We are trying to find our feet, knowing what the right point is, so that we don't over-stretch or exaggerate but equally, if we are too conservative we will be back to square one. It was all part of our learning. It was an opportunity to see in a real track condition how the product performs as we do have limitation on testing. We do have the Toyota that we ran last weekend in Istanbul Park but it rained for a couple of days so it wasn't as successful as we wanted. But it is a way we can get close to the teams in a real-life situation and have real data.”

Asked whether Pirelli have plans to bring the super-hard tyres to future races, Hembery replied that it depended on their overall performance this weekend.

“Well it depends on the race,” he said. “We will see how the race goes. The track evolution is something that we are also having to learn as you can't do that when you are running on your own, you need to see all 24 cars on the circuit. Support races have a big impact as well. I think we saw that in Melbourne. That was one of the major factors in the changes in strategy, the reduction in pit-stops from what we thought maybe on the Saturday. That may happen again here. We will make a decision on that direction on Sunday night.”

F1 Sofa Blog – FP3 at the Malaysian Grand Prix

Saturday morning dawned hot but dry in Sepang, and track conditions stayed dry throughout the final practice session of the Malaysia Grand Prix weekend.

Lewis Hamilton topped the time sheets at the end of FP3; the British driver pulled together a perfect lap on the soft tyre four minutes before the session drew to a close, displacing Mark Webber from the top spot.

Hamilton's performance means that questions are now being asked about Red Bull's qualifying pace. The Milton Keynes based team had a seemingly unassailable advantage two weeks ago in Melbourne, but it looks as though Saturday afternoon's fight for pole will be a more closely fought battle.

There were less than three-tenths in it, however. Hamilton's 1.36.340s saw him 0.290s ahead of Webber, so the McLarens' current lead does not put the team on anything like an automatic pole.

Sebastian Vettel did not have an ideal morning, finishing FP3 in P5 on the timesheets. The Red Bull driver ran into traffic on his final flying lap, and ended the session behind Jenson Button in P3 and Nick Heidfeld in P4.

Both Heidfeld and Renault teammate Vitaly Petrov fared better on Saturday morning than they had on Friday, when both cars suffered suspension failure in the morning session. Renault had significantly reduced running on Friday afternoon, and their pace this morning despite the lack of track time is a positive indication for the afternoon's qualifying.

Surprise of the morning came from the Scuderia. Fernando Alonso was in P6 on the timesheets at the end of FP3, nearly a full second slower than Hamilton, while teammate Felipe Massa was down in P8, 1.422s off the pace of the leaders. Ferrari had an unsatisfying weekend in Melbourne, but the team was confident that Sepang's twin straights and hotter climes would work to their advantage this weekend. At the moment, that advantage continues to elude the team.

It was a disappointing morning for Mercedes, whose drivers finished in P10 and P11, two seconds off the pace set by Hamilton. Sauber's Kamui Kobayashi finished FP3 in P9, just ahead of Michael Schumacher, while Sergio Perez was in P12, just behind Nico Rosberg.

Based on their times set this morning, HRT appear to have found the pace needed to make it through to Sunday's race. Neither would have made it through based on the times set in FP3, but the improvement in their times, if carried on till this afternoon, should see both drivers squeak through under the 107 percent barrier.

It was a middling day for the middle of the pack, with an average showing by Toro Rosso, Williams, and Force India. None of the three teams have been able to find the right set-up for Sepang, despite promising showings of pace in the Melbourne season-opener. From here, it looks as though Q3 will be beyond the reach of all three teams.

Lotus have opened up a two second gap to the Virgins, but still need to find a few tenths if they are to trouble the likes of Williams and Force India this afternoon.

FP3 times (unofficial)

1. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.36.340s
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.36.630s
3. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.36.762s
4. Nick Heidfeld (Renault) 1.37.115s
5. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.37.175s
6. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.37.284s
7. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.37.297s
8. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.37.762s
9. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.38.059s
10. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.38.300s
11. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.38.307s
12. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.38.448s
13. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.38.464s
14. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.38.597s
15. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.38.665s
16. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.38.681s
17. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.38.716s
18. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.38.864s
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.39.260s
20. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.39.699s
21. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 1.41.215s
22. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.41.414s
23. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) 1.43.147s
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.43.383s

F1 Sofa Blog – Q1 at the Malaysian Grand Prix

It's hot, but mercifully dry, at Sepang International Circuit, as the first qualifying session gets underway. Track temperature is 41°C, while air temperature is hovering around 30°C.

First incident of the session comes at the hands of Sebastian Buemi, who is innocently piloting his STR6 around the track when the sidepod cover pops off.

Ferrari have not had the best of weekends so far, and the team chose to run Felipe Massa on the soft tyre in Q1. In ordinary circumstances, that would be a waste of a good compound for the Scuderia: the decision highlights their current lack of confidence. It seems to have been a good move – with only a few minutes left of the session, both Ferrari drivers are high up the timesheets and safe from elimination.

But there is speculation that a number of front-running teams are keeping the harder tyres in reserve for Q3, with a view to completing a longer stint at the start of the race. There is also the tactical probability of the track being declared wet at the start of the race, freeing the top ten starters from their qualifying rubber.

Towards the end of the session it was a nail-biter down in the Lotus garage: the team looked as though at least one of their drivers might make it into Q2. It was not to be, however. The team can take comfort from the fact that the gap to Pastor Maldonado's Williams in P18 was only a tenth of a second, not the four seconds the team saw for much of last year.

Over at HRT, both drivers were able to lap within 107 percent of the pace-setters time. As a result, the F111 will make its 2011 race debut this weekend.

Drop-out zone

18. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus)
20. Jarno Trulli (Lotus)
21. Timo Glock (Virgin)
22. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin)

23. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT)

24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)

F1 Sofa Blog – Q2 at the Malaysian Grand Prix

Still no rain in Sepang as Q2 gets underway, but that doesn't mean we won't see any tomorrow. The safe money is on the teams hedging their bets set-up wise, protecting against the high possibility of rain without compromising on performance in a dry race.

In Q1, a number of the front-running teams set their times on the hard tyre compound. Q2 saw a widespread switch to softs, with lap times falling in concert with the change.

Lewis Hamilton topped the timesheets early on for McLaren, but he was quickly bested by the two Red Bulls and teammate Jenson Button, as the benchmark slipped from 1.37.3s down to the 1.35s. In the middle of the session, Hamilton was at risk of dropping out in Q2 unless he was able to find two more seconds on a fresh set of rubber.

The Ferraris appear to have found more pace since their disappointing morning session. At one point in Q1 the Scuderia had a 1-2, and Fernando Alonso is beginning to look like the threat to the Red Bulls all had expected him to be.

Force India are only doing one run for each of their drivers this session; putting all of their eggs in one basket is a risky strategy when lap times are falling rapidly. And it's a strategy that doesn't appear to have paid off, with neither man making it through to the final session.

With only one minute left of the session, McLaren are 1-2 and Red Bull 3-4. Button currently leads his teammate, but there is a close margin between the two teams at the front, and everything is lining up nicely for a nail-biting Q3 to come.

Michael Schumacher was knocked out by Nico Rosberg in the closing stages of Q2; joining him were both Force Indias, both Toro Rossos, Rubens Barrichello, and Sergio Perez.

Drop-out zone

11. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)

12. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso)

13. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso)

14. Paul di Resta (Force India)

15. Rubens Barrichello (Williams)

16. Sergio Perez (Sauber)

17. Adrian Sutil (Force India)

F1 Sofa Blog – Q3 at the Malaysian Grand Prix

It's nearly time for Q3 in Sepang, and the provisional grid is all but set for Sunday afternoon.

The McLarens had the edge over the Red Bulls in Q2, and we are in for a thrilling battle for the front two rows if the teams are able to deliver perfect laps in the final session. There is less traffic to contend with, and the track is as rubbered in as it's been all weekend, with no rain yet this afternoon.

Lewis Hamilton is first man out of the pits on the soft tyres. Sebastian Vettel, Mark Webber, and Jenson Button join him on track, also on the option compound.

As the track begins to fill up, Hamilton begins his first flying lap on the soft tyres. It's a clean lap, and the British driver crosses the line in 1.35.000s, taking provisional pole. Button crosses the lap three-tenths down on his teammate after a shaky second sector, while the Red Bulls cross the line down on Hamilton. Webber pops up in P2, ahead of Button, while Vettel puts his teammate down in P3.

None of the other runners are out on track yet, and it looks as though they're all gambling on a single-lap flyer this afternoon.

Fernando Alonso is just heading out on track for Ferrari; he and Renault driver Nick Heidfeld are running single laps on the option tyre. Kamui Kobayashi and Vitaly Petrov leave the pits, both on soft rubber.

With six men lapping the track with only one chance each for maximizing tomorrow's grid position, it's a thrilling Q3 in Sepang. Storms are on the horizon, but all three qualifying sessions have remained dry, and the track is in the best condition we've seen it all weekend.

In a nail-biting finish to the session, Hamilton, Webber, Button, and Vettel all secured the same first sector time. In what could have been a four-way fight for pole, Webber and Button lost time, while Vettel pipped Hamilton to pole by a single tenth. Red Bull's usual qualifying advantage appears to have been negated here in Sepang, and tomorrow's race promises to be a thriller.

Provisional grid

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)

2. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren)

3. Mark Webber (Red Bull)

4. Jenson Button (McLaren)
 5. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
 6. Nick Heidfeld (Renault)
 7. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
 8. Vitaly Petrov (Renault)
 9. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes)
 10. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
 11. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
 12. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso)
 13. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso)
 14. Paul di Resta (Force India)
 15. Rubens Barrichello (Williams)
 16. Sergio Perez (Sauber)
 17. Adrian Sutil (Force India)
 18. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)
 19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus)
 20. Jarno Trulli (Lotus)
 21. Timo Glock (Virgin)
 22. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin)
 23. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT)
 24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)
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F1 Sofa Blog – The post-qualifying analysis

Some things can be said in light of this afternoon's qualifying session at Sepang International Circuit, but given that the Malaysian Grand Prix tends to be troubled by inclement weather it is hard to know what effects qualifying will have on the race itself.

One thing that has to be said is that it looks as though the gap to Red Bull is smaller than it once was, thanks in no small part to heroic efforts by McLaren's factory staff.

There is an argument for saying that the Sepang Circuit is better suited to the MP4-26 than Albert Park, and that the British team was always going to be faster in Malaysia than it was in Australia, but it is an argument that does a disservice to the team in Woking.

Whatever the characteristics of Sepang, Red Bull ran their KERS device in qualifying for the first time this weekend, and by rights the added power boost should have seen the world champions pull away from the competition. Instead, McLaren got closer.

The powerful Mercedes engine will have helped McLaren on Sepang's twin straights, while the accompanying KERS unit is probably the best in the business. But the RB7 still showed incredible grip and handling on the Malaysian circuit's twists and bends, the same track suction that paid such dividends last year.

Where McLaren appear to have improved is in finding some of that downforce in their own car. While the MP4-26 is not a Red Bull beater in corners, Saturday was the closest that McLaren have come thus far. Lewis Hamilton took provisional pole, and was eventually beaten by a solitary tenth of a second, not the eight-tenths that were customary last season.

But while McLaren have found the performance that appeared to be severely lacking in pre-season testing, some of their opponents appear to have mislaid their promise.

Ferrari, naturally, are in a class of their own. The Scuderia is a team that exists to win, and their purpose is being at the top of the heap. So far, this season has proved to be disappointing. But results that see the Scuderia sobbing into their grappas are results that would have other teams weeping with joy.

Fernando Alonso has qualified in P5 in both of this season's grands prix, while he and teammate Felipe Massa made it safely into Q3 in Melbourne and Sepang. Those are results that fellow stalwarts Williams would be thrilled with.

Melbourne was disappointing for Williams and Mercedes: both teams suffered double retirements after qualifying lower than hoped. It emerged after the race that both Williams drivers had seen their races compromised by gearbox failure, while Nico Rosberg retired after a collision with Rubens Barrichello. Michael Schumacher had a lap 1 accident and later retired citing concerns about the safety of his car.

This weekend has been similarly disappointing. Neither Barrichello nor Pastor Maldonado was able to make it out of Q2 for Williams: Maldonado was knocked out in the first round. Rosberg qualified in P9, behind the Renaults, Ferraris, McLarens, and Red Bulls, while Schumacher failed to make it through to the final session.

Mercedes hoped that they would be able to outgun Renault this season and keep their place in the so-called "Big Four", but following Petrov's Melbourne podium and Nick Heidfeld's return to form this weekend, it looks as though they will have a fight on their hands.

Renault went for an aggressive car design this season, and at the moment their choice appears to be reaping dividends. Heidfeld had a poor weekend in Melbourne, but Petrov's podium scored the team valuable points. Given clean starts tomorrow, the two drivers should be able to capitalise on their strong qualifying and bring home solid points in the constructors' championship.

Kamui Kobayashi made it into Q3 for Sauber: the Japanese driver will be starting Sunday's race in P10. Sergio Perez made it to P16, 0.03s slower than

Barrichello. Perez could be a driver to watch in tomorrow's race. If he is able to replicate Melbourne's deft tyre touch in Sepang's punishing conditions, he should be in a position to leapfrog the opposition during the pit stops.

Force India had a day of mixed results. Rookie Paul di Resta outqualified his teammate for the second race running; Adrian Sutil was two-tenths down on his teammate and squeaked into P17. Neither man made it into Q3, but given the level of competition at the head of the pack it doesn't appear that the car is currently capable.

Apart from Sebastien Buemi losing a chunk of sidepod in Q1, Toro Rosso had a pretty unremarkable day. The cars were evenly matched on pace, with Buemi qualifying in P12 and Jaime Alguersuari in P13, but Toro Rosso appear to be affected by the same problem as Force India. They're quick, but they're not quite quick enough to claim the slim pickings left over when Red Bull, McLaren, Ferrari, Renault, and Mercedes have claimed their share.

Lotus and Virgin qualified towards the back of the pack, and all four drivers were out in Q1. You might think it's the same old story, but you'd be wrong. Heikki Kovalainen was on the edge of making it into Q2, and ended up qualifying only 0.3s slower than the Williams of Pastor Maldonado. Teammate Jarno Trulli was half a second slower than Maldonado. That sort of gap would have been unimaginable last year, and the team are confident there's more to come.

Virgin doesn't appear to have made as great a stride to the mid-field; Timo Glock was two seconds slower than Kovalainen, while teammate Jerome D'Ambrosio was another 0.5s behind.

HRT are unlikely to be troubling the front runners for points, but there is no doubt that the team have improved since the Australian weekend – having the right parts on the car will have helped there. Based on their current pace, however, the Spanish team is likely to trouble Virgin for position on track.

Provisional grid

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)
2. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren)
3. Mark Webber (Red Bull)
4. Jenson Button (McLaren)
5. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
6. Nick Heidfeld (Renault)
7. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
8. Vitaly Petrov (Renault)
9. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes)
10. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
11. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
12. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso)
13. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso)
14. Paul di Resta (Force India)
15. Rubens Barrichello (Williams)
16. Sergio Perez (Sauber)
17. Adrian Sutil (Force India)
18. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus)
20. Jarno Trulli (Lotus)
21. Timo Glock (Virgin)
22. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin)
23. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT)
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)

F1 Sofa Blog – Saturday press conference in Sepang

It's like déjà-vu all over again. The post-qualifying press conference in Sepang was made up of the same three men – in the same three seats – as the Saturday press conference in Melbourne.

Pole-sitter Sebastian Vettel came out with the undoubted quote of the weekend: "I think, when you go to qualifying, you put your trousers down and you see what you have got." If that's not a challenge to your opponents' masculinity, I don't know what is.

Despite having pole snatched away by Vettel in the dying seconds of the session, Lewis Hamilton was pleased with his overall result.

"I don't think we can be disappointed," Hamilton said. "As I said going into the last race, we have done a fantastic job to even be up there with the Red Bulls, so I feel very proud of the effort the guys put in, especially in getting some new parts for this weekend and just constantly moving forward. I think we can be happy with it. I would have loved to have put (the car) into P1 but these guys still have a slight edge. Clearly, we have closed the gap a little bit or so it seems here. The lap wasn't perfect, so I will have to improve on that."

McLaren's Sepang set-up was very similar to the one run in Melbourne, Hamilton said, although the team did take delivery of some new components on Friday.

"Well, we had some newer components come earlier on in the weekend, so we've had them since Friday, so nothing new this morning," the McLaren driver said. "Small improvements to the car, nothing major, but it just so happens we seem to be a lot closer to these guys this weekend. The update

package that we thought we had here didn't give us as much as we had hoped, so that's a good sign, shows that there's still more to come. I can't really complain. I'm on the front row."

With Red Bull running KERS in qualifying for the first time this season, Mark Webber was asked to give his opinion on the integration of the system. The Australian driver took the opportunity to thank the team for all their hard work and late nights getting the job done.

"Clearly, we've got a quick car but you still come up on people and most people we can pass without KERS, within reason obviously," Webber said. "Most of the field are a bit off; obviously when we come against Ferraris and McLarens and those sort of guys it's more even. KERS is something which you should always push to have and, as I've touched on, the guys have done a monumental job in getting everything here. It's a long season, so we needed to try to introduce it as soon as possible, we're learning with every lap. We believe it's the right thing; that's why it's on the car and we'll go into tomorrow's race and learn even more again. It's a good step from the team this weekend. Ferocious conditions for the guys to work in. I don't know how well the curfew is working but I look in their eyes and it doesn't look so clever, the curfew, but anyway, they've done a great job."

Vettel joined his teammate in thanking the crew behind his KERS device. "Big compliment to the guys in the team, especially the guys with the KERS system," he said. "We got lots of criticism after the last race for not having run it all the time. It is something we were not proud of but we came here and we solved most of our problems, and I think if we did not have it today then we would not be here, both of us, so it is a great achievement and compliments to those guys. We all work hand-in-hand and if this is the reward, then we keep working, I would say, so very pleased."

All three of the drivers present are looking forward to tomorrow's race, and each anticipates that a variety of different strategies will be run across the grid.

"I expect more stops definitely than Australia, so we will see how many," Vettel said. "I am just hoping that all the spectators don't lose the count, so we try to keep it up and hope people outside are as well. ... There are so many things still to come. It is a long race tomorrow and when we wake up tomorrow, today is history, and it is a new day, a new chance. Obviously, if you start from pole you cannot really improve, but first you have to get the job done. Surprised it has not rained yet but we know here that it is very likely to rain, so things can happen and you can't take anything for granted."

Hamilton agreed. "I think it will be very interesting to see," he said. "As Sebastian was saying, there's going to be a bit of a difference through strategy, probably more pit stops, tyres seem to be lasting as well in this climate, but you don't know what the weather's going to be like tomorrow. I think, generally, you will see the fight between ourselves and the Red Bulls. They seemed to have a little bit better long run pace yesterday, so we will see how it is tomorrow. I don't know who is behind us, is it the Ferraris? Of course, they are still in the fight and anything can happen."

The reduced gap between McLaren and Red Bull was also a hot topic of discussion.

"I knew everyone was on a similar pace after the first run on the options," Webber said. "It was pretty straightforward for us, just try to drive as quick as we can. We can't control how tight it is. We don't say someone is three-tenths or two-tenths or whatever, you still just try to do your best. Better performance from me today compared to Melbourne and so looking forward to tomorrow."

Hamilton was pleased with his lap for P2, but the British driver thinks he could have reduced the gap to Red Bull even more had he been able to pull together a perfect lap at the right time in Q3.

"There was a little bit of time in my lap and afterwards I saw that there was just over a tenth (between myself and Sebastian)," Hamilton said. "That's pretty much exactly what I had in the lap, no more, so it would have been very, very close, if I had been able to extract... it would have generally been the perfect lap if I'd managed to get that out of the car so..."

Asked to explain the reduced gap between the teams when Red Bull had added KERS and McLaren were running a very similar set-up to Melbourne, Hamilton didn't know what to answer.

"That's a really good question that I don't really have a great answer for," the British driver said. "Probably, at the last circuit, there were more medium and slower speed corners and obviously less straights, and the KERS was worth less there than it is here. I think their car, particularly, seemed to be quite good, a little bit better than ours maybe in the slower, medium... and the fast. I'm not sure, maybe we optimised it a little bit more through set-up and we were able to extract... because the package that we had in the last race had just arrived and we had to make do with it through P1, P2 and P3 and we don't have a lot of time, so maybe we just optimised it a little bit more. As I said, we do have a couple of small things on the car that have given us more efficiency so overall it's been all positive generally for us."

F1 Sofa Blog – The Malaysian Grand Prix as it happened

Based on the results of the Malaysia Grand Prix, 2011's podiums are likely to be made up of Sebastian Vettel, a McLaren driver, and a Renault driver. The men on Sunday's podium might not have been the same men who lined up two weeks ago in Australia, but the race suits were the same.

At least, they would have been if Nick Heidfeld hadn't been clad in his snazzy gold attire.

The Malaysian Grand Prix was both dry and incident-free, surprising pundits around the world. There were a number of prangs in the race itself, but the Safety Car stayed in the pits all afternoon.

Sebastian Vettel commanded the afternoon's proceedings once again, and was able to maintain a consistent lead over the opposition despite a KERS problem that plagued his car and that of teammate Mark Webber.

Vettel held onto his lead going into the first corner, and only ceded position while in the pits. It was a busy afternoon for the pit crews, as the bulk of drivers were on three-stop strategies, while some men were forced into four by collisions and damage accrued. Vettel's KERS unit worked until the

middle of the race, while Webber's appeared to fail off the start. But after his second pit stop, race leader Vettel was warned against using KERS for the duration of the race. What could have been a serious problem in another car barely seemed to affect the young German's running.

Webber, in contrast, got off to a poor start but made up positions over the course of the race thanks to a judicious use of his DRS and the RB7's superglue-like traction in corners. The Australian driver looked to be glued to the rear end of any car he was chasing, and while his opponents were able to pull away in the straights, he was right back on top come the corners. Webber finished the race in P4.

Just ahead was Heidfeld, who delivered Renault their second podium of the season after a consistent race that saw him and teammate Vitaly Petrov make up places off the start. Heidfeld's afternoon brought smooth running and a nifty pass on Hamilton in the closing laps, while Petrov was responsible for the afternoon's moment of drama when he went briefly airborne on lap 54 and retired from the race after demolishing some trackside advertising.

It was a mixed bag of results for McLaren, who at one point looked to be on course for two drivers on the podium come the chequered flag. Hamilton led his teammate for much of the race, but Jenson Button was able to jump him in the third round of pit stops. While Button then concentrated on closing the gap to Vettel in P1, Hamilton got caught up in a tussle with Fernando Alonso that negatively impacted both men's races when the Spanish driver misjudged the width of his car in an overtaking attempt, destroyed his own front wing, and damaged the Briton's tyres.

Alonso pitted immediately for a new wing, while Hamilton gamely hung on only to be overtaken by Nick Heidfeld before running wide and letting Webber pass him. McLaren called him into the pits for a fourth stop with only a handful of laps remaining, and Hamilton was only able to salvage P7 from what should have been a podium finish.

Ferrari might be having problems with their single-lap speed in qualifying, but their current race pace looks very promising, Alonso's prang aside. Both Alonso and teammate Felipe Massa spent the afternoon dicing with the McLarens and Red Bulls, something they are currently unable to do on Saturdays. But Sunday is when the points are handed out, and if the Scuderia are able to maintain consistent race performance while improving their Saturday speed, they should be on course for regular podiums in the not too distant future.

Paul di Resta managed to collect another point for Force India, finishing in P10 and more than ten seconds clear of teammate Adrian Sutil. In the closing laps of the race, di Resta was battling Michael Schumacher for P10. The Mercedes driver managed to pass the Scottish rookie, but Petrov's retirement on lap 54 promoted di Resta back into the points.

Schumacher beat teammate Nico Rosberg this afternoon, although neither man set the world on fire today. Rosberg got a poor start, and spent the rest of the race circulating in the mid-field, with points out of reach. Nevertheless, it was an improvement on the last race in Melbourne, which saw both men retire.

It was another disappointing weekend for Williams, who saw both drivers retire for the second race running. Pastor Maldonado was the first man to retire; the Venezuelan pitted on lap 9 and never returned to the track. Rubens Barrichello hung on till lap 23, when his third pit stop of the day became his last.

Lotus have definitely made strides to the mid-field, and both they and rivals Virgin are currently ahead of Williams in the constructors' championship, thanks to the latter's double retirements in both races thus far. Both Virgin and Lotus ended the race one man – and one lap – down, but Heikki Kovalainen's race pace was consistent, and the Finn was able to finish within sight of the Toro Rossos.

It was an average afternoon for Toro Rosso: both drivers finished the race a lap down on the leaders and out of the points.

Sauber's pit stop strategy gave the team a P8 finish for Kamui Kobayashi. The Japanese driver pulled off a two-stop strategy when the rest of the field was stopping three or four times, in an echo of the Melbourne Grand Prix that saw Sergio Perez stop once to the field's two and three stops. Perez retired from this afternoon's race after damaging his car running over debris on track.

HRT started Sunday's race, but neither car was a classified finisher. Narain Karthikeyan was out on lap 15, while Tonio Liuzzi hung on till lap 47.

Race results (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.37.39.832
2. Jenson Button (McLaren) +3.261
3. Nick Heidfeld (Renault) +25.075
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull) +26.384
5. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) +36.958
6. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) +37.248
7. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) +49.957
8. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) +1.07.239
9. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) +1.24.896
10. Paul di Resta (Force India) +1.31.563
11. Adrian Sutil (Force India) +1.45.000
12. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) +1 lap
13. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) +1 lap
14. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) +1 lap
15. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) +1 lap
16. Timo Glock (Virgin) +2 laps
17. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) +4 laps

Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) RET lap 47

Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) RET lap 43

Jarno Trulli (Lotus) RET lap 32
Sergio Perez (Sauber) RET lap 24
Rubens Barrichello (Williams) RET lap 23
Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) RET lap 15
Pastor Maldonado (Williams) RET lap 9

Drivers' standings

1. Sebastian Vettel – 50 points
2. Jenson Button – 26 points
3. Lewis Hamilton – 24 points
4. Mark Webber – 22 points
5. Fernando Alonso – 20 points
6. Felipe Massa – 16 points
7. Nick Heidfeld – 15 points
8. Vitaly Petrov – 15 points
9. Sebastien Buemi – 4 points
10. Kamui Kobayashi – 4 points
11. Adrian Sutil – 2 points
12. Michael Schumacher – 2 points
13. Paul di Resta – 2 points
14. Jaime Alguersuari – 0 points
15. Nico Rosberg – 0 points
16. Jarno Trulli – 0 points
17. Jerome D'Ambrosio – 0 points
18. Heikki Kovalainen – 0 points
19. Timo Glock – 0 points
20. Rubens Barrichello – 0 points
21. Tonio Liuzzi – 0 points
22. Pastor Maldonado – 0 points
23. Sergio Perez – 0 points
24. Narain Karthikeyan – 0 points

Constructors' standings

1. Red Bull Racing – 72 points
2. McLaren – 50 points
3. Ferrari – 36 points
4. Renault – 30 points
5. Toro Rosso – 4 points
6. Sauber – 4 points
7. Force India – 4 points
8. Mercedes – 2 points
9. Lotus – 0 points
10. Virgin – 0 points
11. Williams – 0 points
12. HRT – 0 points

F1 Sofa Blog – Sunday press conference in Sepang

With Sebastian Vettel taking top honours, and the next two places going to a McLaren driver and a Renault driver, the post-race conference had something of the familiar about it. Jenson Button and Nick Heidfeld joined the current world champion to face the press corps after Sunday's race.

Vettel was thrilled with his second win of the season, the best possible start in his battle to keep the drivers' championship crown in 2011.

“Another great day,” Vettel said. “The start was crucial. I thought I had a really good start and then I saw Lewis lining up behind me quickly. Then I was surprised going into turn one as all of a sudden I saw something black in my mirrors. I knew it was a Lotus and then I realised it was Nick. Obviously for the first stint it was a good thing to happen as I could pull away lap by lap. I think the grand prix was different to what we saw two weeks ago especially with tyres going off. On the one side you do not want to be the first in as the shorter you get the more stops you might have to do in the end, but on the other hand if someone goes in he has the advantage on new tyres and might undercut you. I think it was quite difficult and it was tight with Lewis but I always had a couple of seconds in hand so we could control that – but still it was never easy until the last stint. Lewis had a problem, I don't know what happened to him but I realised Jenson was behind and I could comfortably control the gap so with not too many laps to go it was quite good. Very pleased as I said. I love what I do and I don't think I can be happier at this stage.”

But it was not a perfect day for the Red Bull driver, whose KERS failed half-way through the race.

“It was a little bit on-off during the race,” Vettel said. “It is something we have to work on but still never forget two weeks ago we didn't race it at all and today it was very crucial at the start. Without KERS again we would have been in a completely different position and the race would have unfolded in a different way. It was giving us what we needed and being in a luxury situation, being a little bit ahead, we had a little problem so we turned it off and it went back on.”

“At some stage [my engineer] told me not to use KERS, then we activated it again. I don’t know what was the problem,” Vettel continued. “Obviously, something was wrong, otherwise, as I have said many times, it’s lap time. Obviously, as I tried to explain before, I think it’s very difficult to read the true pace. At some stage, in the third stint, I think, so my last stint on options, I was lapping a second a lap quicker than Lewis for two or three laps, I think. At that stage, I don’t think I used KERS, I think that’s the time you are talking about. But surely, I can assure you that not running KERS, for us, is a disadvantage. As I tried to explain, we worked very hard and we got it working, but in the race something happened, I don’t quite yet know what it was but we used it for the majority (of the race) and I don’t think pace has anything to do with it... especially turning it off and then going quicker, has anything to do with that.”

Button called the race confusing, but Heidfeld thought it was all a matter of perspective. “I think it’s easier if you have a good start from the back to see what the guys in front of you are doing,” he said. “I was kind of lucky that there was enough space on the outside opening up for me just to concentrate on a good braking point. I not only had a good start, but also a good braking into turn one and managed to secure second position.”

But the real story of the afternoon was the high rate of tyre degradation which – combined with the DRS – led to position changes galore, with overtaking manoeuvres throughout the race.

“Racing has changed,” Vettel said. “I think the big secret is to be on top of your tyres all the time. If you told everyone that on lap 11 or lap nine for instance, please go as fast as you can, it would probably look a little bit different. On the other hand, you try naturally to go as fast as you can but also at the same time try to look after your tyres, trying to predict what is going to happen. Obviously, you know strategy-wise what is your sort of plan, how many laps you need to achieve etc., etc. There are a lot of tactics going on. Sometimes you’re holding back, other times you’re pushing flat out, so, therefore, I think the gaps between the cars, how quick people go, who’s quickest on whatever lap might change quicker than what we are used to seeing. I think that’s one of the biggest reasons, from my point of view.”

“Yes, I totally agree,” Button added. “We’re all trying to find a pace that we think is right for consistency but also speed, and it’s very tricky to find that balance. I was a little bit surprised, personally, in the first stint, how quick the Lotus Renaults were, and, also, I was surprised by the Ferraris. But I got a bit more of a handle on it in the second and third stints and I think we had pretty good pace.”

“Adding to what was said,” Heidfeld interjected, “probably some cars are better on long runs than others. That’s what will be more crucial this year with the Pirelli tyres, because there’s more degradation. It seems we already had a better pace in the race in Melbourne than we had in qualifying. On top of that, I think this weekend was not easy for us because we lost a lot of time on Friday and we definitely didn’t have the perfect set-up and there’s probably a bit more to gain there in the future.”

Button went into detail about his experience of the Pirellis during Sunday’s race.

“Well, the thing is it’s very difficult to understand what to do with the tyre,” the British driver said. “If you try and preserve it sometimes you make the situation worse as you are not carrying as much speed through a high-speed corner and then you get less downforce and you damage the tyre more so it is a very, very tricky situation to be in.”

One the race was underway, Button added, “I realised I had been very conservative with my front wing angle. I think we are all trying to look after the tyres and I backed out too much front wing and I was really struggling at the front end. Sometimes that can also cause degradation of the rear as you have to put in so much steering lock and then when you get on the power with steering lock it causes oversteer. That was why my first stint was not very good, then every stint from then on I improved. ... With these tyres as soon as they go, they go. It is what they are supposed to do and it is exactly what they do do. As I said I had the wrong balance on the first stint and I thought that the rears would be okay but they went off a lot earlier than I expected. I didn’t expect the Ferraris and the Lotus Renault GP to be as consistent as they were and our degradation was bigger so made a few set-up changes in the stops and improved from there.”

The three men agreed that the tyres had delivered an interesting – if chaotic – afternoon.

“There were people all over the place which is good, isn’t it?,” Button asked. “Was it better or not? I was in the car, I don’t know. It is complicated, and I think at this point of the season it’s going to be because there’s a lot that we’re trying to learn ourselves on the circuit. If we had one tyre for the whole race and didn’t have pit stops, would it be exciting? I don’t know. I think that it’s the correct thing to do, to make the tyres that they have and I think Pirelli have done a great job of actually getting tyres that have degradation in the time that they’ve had to build these tyres. I think that in the time they’ve had to build these tyres they’ve done a very good job. I think it made the racing exciting today. For me, I didn’t know who was going to finish behind Seb. I did in the end, which is great. I think it’s working well and I think that as the season goes on we will realise and understand the tyres a little bit more every race. The races will calm down, but hopefully not too much. Hopefully, they will still be exciting.”

“Regarding the show,” Vettel added, “it’s hard for all of us to judge because we are very busy with our own race and looking after our own tyres but I think there are more battles going on, and that’s obviously something people want to see. For all us, I think there’s a lot to pick up and a lot to learn, because there are so many things going on: more than one stop. So the racing has changed. Obviously, if you look at the race speed, the lap times compared to last year, we are much slower. In qualifying, the difference is not that big, but in the race there’s quite a difference. There are some things you lose, there are other things you gain, so it’s always give and take.”

“I think both things are true,” Heidfeld concluded. “It’s probably more complicated to understand from the outside, but at the same time the show’s better, because for sure there was more overtaking going on.”

F1 Sofa Blog – Analysing the Malaysian Grand Prix

Marbles, overtaking, and a dry race were the three main characteristics of Sunday’s Malaysian Grand Prix.

By the last of the 56 laps at Sepang International Circuit, the track was covered in a carpet of marbles. We joked that drivers were going off line with

the express intention of picking up a new set of soft tyres without the need for a pit stop.

But what was funny from a distance was actually painful for the men behind the wheel.

Force India driver Paul di Resta is quoted by the Daily Telegraph as saying the marbles ricocheted off the track and into the cockpits, hurting the drivers.

“There are a lot of marbles out there, maybe too many,” di Resta said. “Come the end of the race, it gets difficult to overtake. The other big thing is that they kept coming up and hitting me in the hands. In the middle of a fast corner, these lumps of rubber would be smacking into my hands as I turned the wheel. Rubber is not the softest material and if it got you in the right place, it could hurt. It happened quite a few times over the weekend and as you go into the corner, the rubber runs across the tyre and flicks up.”

When asked, Pirelli motorsport director Paul Hembery said that his team had not heard of the complaint. “I have not had those comments from the top three but if it’s an issue, we will have to confront it,” he said. “There was a lot of overtaking though. We will have to analyse all the overtaking manoeuvres but the marbles have to go somewhere and that is a difficulty for us.”

Over at Ferrari, team principal Stefano Domenicali said that the excessive marbling off the racing line had affected his drivers’ ability to overtake.

“I like the way [Fernando Alonso] is driving, it is fantastic, but the other consideration is that we need to consider this year is that if you go off line it is a big problem,” Domenicali said. “The track is all dirty with the marbles, so you try to keep your line and, if you just go off the line, you put the marbles on the tyres and you lose performance.”

Meanwhile, in his own post-race analysis, Renault driver Vitaly Petrov told Autosport that he thought the marbles had a part to play in his dramatic late-race flight.

“I think I picked up just a little bit of rubber,” the Russian driver said, “and as soon as you take one piece of rubber, you have a little bit of understeer. I think I had this little bit of understeer and then I went wider and wider. You should be able to come back to the track there, so I just kept going – but then I hit the big bump.”

Anyone watching Sunday’s race will have seen the dramatic layers of rubber off the racing line in Sepang. It was impossible to miss them, and it is unsurprising that they are now a hot topic of discussion in the paddock.

But it is those marbles that helped contribute to what was an exciting and dramatic dry race, and it would be a shame to see a reversion to the single-stop races that turned many of 2010’s races into post-qualifying parades.

Without the varying degrees of tyre wear, a total of 55 pit stops, and a range of different pit wall strategies in play, it is unlikely that we would have seen as many overtaking manoeuvres as we saw on Sunday.

The DRS was undoubtedly more effective in Malaysia than it was in Australia, but the DRS-enabled passes tended to come about when a man on fresh rubber was advancing on a driver with older tyres.

Those overtakes that happened without recourse to the DRS or KERS happened as a result of the varying grip levels between the man in front and the man behind.

We are unlikely to see such marbling in Shanghai; the high track temperatures in Malaysia contributed to the tyre degradation. The conditions that made the Sepang race so thrilling are not likely to be repeated at most of the tracks on the calendar. Later on in the season, when the F1 circus returns to more tropical climes, rubber will once more litter the track.

But in cooler conditions – even those found across Europe in the summer months – the Pirellis are likely to perform much as they did in Melbourne. There is no need for Pirelli to change their compounds now.

We asked them to provide rubber that would shake up the racing. Malaysia may have been more tempestuous than expected, but it was once hell of a race. So much happened on track that some pundits are now asking if F1 has become too exciting.

As if.
