

Fl Spanish Grand Prix – Thursday press conference

The first European press conference of the 2012 Formula One season was also the first press conference to be televised in full, thanks to the ever-hungry Sky Sports Fl channel's ceaseless search for material.

Present were Fernando Alonso (Ferrari), Nico Hulkenberg (Force India), Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber), Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus), Pedro de la Rosa (HRT), and Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull).

Kamui, so far this season a couple of good races and a couple not so good. What's been the difference between them?

Kamui KOBAYASHI: Of course it's definitely the car. We had quite good performance at the start, quite a good start to the season. Unfortunately, we also some races where the strategy was not really going well. It's not let's a bad thing for my season. I had a great start but I think we have to work hard especially on the long runs.

Yesterday, Fernando talked about drivers having more respect for one another. Do you think that's the case? Should drivers leave more space for each other?

KK: Maybe. I don't know. It's always difficult to say.

You're quite an aggressive overtaker

KK: Yeah, but for me I'm doing something quite normal. It's not special. I'm just doing my job. Maybe it looks aggressive but I never crash with anyone. I never crash and stop the car. There may be contact but it's always quite OK. Maybe it looks aggressive but it's not aggressive in fact.

And of course, you've been on the receiving end as we remember from Spa last year.

KK: Spa last year? Where? Ah, with Lewis, you mean? That's what I mean that was just an accident you know. I didn't expect both cars to make contact because there was no point. I didn't expect Lewis to come across and I just stayed on my line. It was just sudden, you know. There was no way to avoid that. That was something special though, it's not really a racing accident and not aggressive stuff from me, so...

Nico, on paper you've been beaten by your team-mate so far this year. How are you feeling about it?

Nico HULKENBERG: Well, the first four races have been quite tough to be honest. I would have liked to take more than two points out of the first four races. We have been quite unfortunate in some races, such as Melbourne, where we had a first-corner incident and there was very little I could do and then a clutch failure issues in Bahrain. These were two races where we potentially could have finished in the points. But I'm looking forward, I'm bedding in well with the team. I think the team is doing a good job in putting everything together and if we get a bit more luck then I think it will be good.

How do you feel about team development? Are the developments coming at a reasonable rate as far as you're concerned?

NH: Yes, definitely. We bring some new parts, probably like every other team, here and we have to wait and see where the new parts put us but obviously we're hoping it's a step forward. I think it is a step forward but just how big a step we'll see over the next two days.

Pedro, we see a new team that has recently moved to new premises and taken on a lot of new staff. What sort of role do you see yourself playing in the development of Hispania Racing Team?

Pedro DE LA ROSA: As you've said, everything is new. We're establishing ourselves; restructuring the team; we are growing. But really I'm not playing any different role than any other race driver would do. I'm part of the team; I'm a race driver; I'm experienced. If they need my advice on anything, I am there. But I'm not playing any special role other than driving as fast as I can and giving good feedback about the car.

You spent so long at McLaren are you not trying to put some of those influences on the team?

PDLR: Gradually I will. That's the aim and that's what I'm here for as well. But so far the team has been extremely busy trying to move into our new premises in Madrid, establish a structure, a 'basement' as I say, and after that we will grow gradually and that's when I think my input will be, if possible, more beneficial. But so far the objective has been clear. We have to establish ourselves, we have to put the ground for building more floors on top of us but so far I've been very discreet and not in a very important position.

And where do you hope the team will be at the end of the year?

PDLR: I have no idea really. We are improving race by race. We have made the car a lot quicker. Don't forget at the first grand prix we did not qualify and gradually we have been closing the gap to pole position. That's what we have to aim for: race by race, closing the gap, making sure that our car is a little bit quicker than it was at the previous grand prix. After that, at the end of the year, we will see. We don't have to set ourselves any targets other than making the team more competitive race by race.

Kimi, you were plainly a little frustrated that you could have won at Bahrain but didn't. Is that a true appraisal of your feelings about Bahrain?

Kimi RAIKKONEN: Yeah, I think once you get so close, you're not happy with second. If you're 20 seconds behind then it doesn't really matter but we had a chance but at least for the team it was a good weekend.

You're a two-time winner here, both from pole position. Do you think a win is possible here? You've said your team will be winners at some stage.

KR: Well, the rules are different, so you don't have to be on pole now to win. We'll try. I don't know how it will go. It's very difficult to say before the weekend starts. The teams are very close. So if everything goes smoothly then we can be up there. But small difficulties in some areas and you're suddenly much further back. We try to do everything right and then see what happens.

You didn't test at Mugello as apparently the team hadn't brought major modification, but for this race have you at least brought modifications that will at least see you maintain where you were at the opening rounds?

KR: We should have some new parts and we'll see what happens.

Fernando, another winner here in 2006. How did you feel the Ferrari was in testing? Did you feel it was a lot different?

Fernando ALONSO: No, not really. We didn't have any big improvements in the car, so what we tested were different set-ups and things we missed from winter testing. It's been quite difficult for us with a lot of problems on the car and not many laps. The Mugello test was to complete what we had left from winter but in terms of improvements, we had minimum changes on the car so it felt the same?

Did that set-up research, as it were, make you feel more comfortable with the car, more competitive?

FA: Well, we'll see. Obviously we had some ideas in terms of setup and some different possibilities that we were not introducing in the first four races because we didn't have the opportunity to test them. So, it was good in Mugello: some of them were positive; some of them were negative so it's good to know. As much information as you have is better preparation for the next grand prix. Obviously we arrive more prepared now than how we arrived in Australia with only three tests in the winter. But to make the car faster I think in terms of setup you cannot find much. If you want to be running at the front it's more aerodynamic parts and updates in the car. Hopefully they come but we need to wait.

You know this circuit pretty well, you had a very good start to the race last year – do you think we're going to see more overtaking on the circuit now, what with more KERS and a longer DRS as well?

FA: I think it will be similar to last year, to be honest. I saw some numbers of previous races here. On average like four or five overtaking manoeuvres in the last nine years and last year there were 57 – so it was a big change. The race this year will be similar to last year because of the degradation, the DRS and the KERS. With all the possibilities that we have now, as we had last year, for sure we will see some more overtaking. This changes also a little bit the philosophy of this circuit. As Kimi said, pole position was 60 per cent of the victories, now pole position is obviously the best starting position but it's not crucial anymore because with this year's tyres it's less important.

Sebastian, you broke the mould last year by winning from second on the grid, where you've started for the last three years but you won last year from there. This is such a performance track, is this a track where you're really looking for an indicator for the rest of the first half of the season? If you're competitive here you will be elsewhere?

Sebastian VETTEL: Well, I think if you are competitive here I think it means that you have been previously. It's a track that we usually know quite a lot from winter testing, we have some data to compare to, so it's very familiar. But it doesn't mean if you are competitive here you are competitive everywhere. Equally, if you are not competitive here it doesn't mean you will never be competitive. I think it's similar to other tracks. Really, if you think which sector you're talking about, which speed range of the cars. I think you have sectors on every track where you could get an indication. As I said, I think it's the fact that we know a lot about this track, we have a lot of data to compare against, to see if we did a step forward compared to the winter and how big the step was. Surely then you have to consider different temperatures: it's a different time of year so it's also difficult to compare black and white – but yeah as a rule of thumb probably this circuit does give you an idea because simply you have all the corners you find somewhere else, you have tight chicanes like in the last sector, hard braking for the hairpin, fast corners like in the first sector. You have a bit of everything.

And yet everyone has been here, everyone knows exactly what sort of setup they would require. Is it perhaps one of the toughest races in that respect?

SV: Yeah it is. But as I said as well, you race here in May, it's quite different if you look at the temperatures compared to February or March, so yeah, it does have a big change on the setup, so whatever you might have found out over the winter in testing, it might not work in the same way or the same style it did during testing. Also, you need to consider that the cars you launch are quite different to the cars you race at the first race, and then, you know, you race around May or June later in the season. So, yeah, it's a bit wishy-washy because of that – but overall it's a track we know fairly well from a driving point of view as we've done a lot of laps here. We should know our way around here.

Question for Pedro and Fernando, about the Spanish Grand Prix in general because here and there we read about the difficult situation in Valencia, the difficult situation in Barcelona and now we have two grand prix but in the worst situation we will finish with no grand prix at all. Your thoughts about it.

PDLR: I've said a lot already since the first time we were told that Spain would have two grands prix, that it was a historical moment and a unique situation and we should be very, very proud of it. I still say the same answer: we still have two grands prix in Spain this year, and we should, all of us, be very proud, very happy and maximise this moment and then wait for the future to tell us what will happen – which is completely out of our hands, you know? This is all I can say. I'm very happy to be here, this is a Spanish Grand Prix, but also a Spanish Grand Prix with a Spanish driver in a Spanish team – so let's forget about what might happen in the future because, as I said, I have absolutely no control over it.

Gentlemen, Michael Schumacher persistently criticises the Pirelli tyres, or at least the policy of Pirelli. To us and the fans it's clear that Pirelli has been a major ingredient in the improvement of the quality of the racing this year and last year. Do any of you share Michael's concerns about the tyres or do you think he's just making excuses for not winning?

FA: I think Seb should answer, being German.

SV: Yeah? I think, y'know, we get a completely different impression inside the car than you might get outside the car. So, you're always talking of two different worlds. I think for us quality of racing, if you compare racing today, you have to, I think, look after your tyres a lot more than probably you had to three, four, five years ago. For us, if you take, for instance, 2009 where we were allowed to refuel, we had new tyres and the tyres lasted longer, in that they didn't see that much degradation. It's a different quality inside the car because you can push nearly every lap similar to qualifying, whereas now I think the racing is different: we fuel the cars up, they are much heavier, and if you have a heavier car there's more stress for the tyres, so it puts the whole thing in a different window. If you put a new set of tyres on with 20 laps to go, or 15 laps to go, which is, let's say, the stint length, earlier, a couple of years ago, it's a different world for the tyres. The tyres do see more degradation and then we start to slide and then one guy slides more than the other because he puts his tyres on two laps earlier. It creates a different type of racing, more overtaking, which I imagine is seen as better quality from the outside, simply because things happen. I think it depends what you really want. We have more overtaking. Fernando is good with numbers, so like Fernando said earlier. I think the races today – over the last two years since we have changed a couple of things – has become

much better. Also for us. I had a race here where I was following – how many laps is the race, 66? – I think I was following Felipe [Massa] for 60 laps out of that and I couldn't pass. Nowadays you know that your chance will come in the race and that's changing the position inside the car as well.

Fernando...

FA: I don't know. I agree with Seb but I don't agree that Michael has continually criticised Pirelli. Michael said one thing and what has been written in the press has maybe exaggerated what he said. I read what he said and I don't see any big problem with that.

Fernando, you have a very different car from this race. Let's suppose this car does not correspond to that criteria...

FA: We'll see, we'll see after the race, because we don't know what car we have. Obviously we have new parts, but everybody has new parts. Because it's Ferrari, there are quite a lot of expectations every race we go to. It seems like only Ferrari is bringing new parts. We have a step forward, we believe, on what we had in Bahrain, but we also know that it's not the last step we have to do. It's a continuous work, that we need to start here in Barcelona, making a step forward and try to improve our qualifying position and our race pace, but in Monaco we have to bring new parts. In Canada (we have to) bring new parts. So we will not bring a new car to every race as it seems that we brought here in Barcelona.

But just to finish the question: if the car does not correspond...

FA: I answer you on Sunday.

Yes, but just to finish: considering your car has completely new ideas, a revolutionary car, do you think this could be the end of the season for Ferrari and you will start thinking about next year's car?

FA: I don't think so. I don't think so. We need to see how the car works here and if it works fine, it will be a good step, the first step of many that we have to do during the next couple of races. If the step is not good enough, because the others improved the same or more than us so we remain in the same position, we need to work harder, for Monaco and for Canada, and bring more new parts in a more aggressive approach or whatever, because the championship is long and we will never give up in May, after four races.

Do you think the basis of this car could be used for next year's car?

FA: I think so. Yes.

For all of you: if you look at the drivers in 1992, there were only two non-European countries represented. If you look at the same field twenty years later, this year, there are seven non-European countries represented. Is there a chance that in a few more years, the majority of the drivers will come from outside Europe and how do you think that will impact the sport?

KK: It's difficult to say. For drivers I think it's very difficult, everywhere, Asia especially. I don't know for the future, but at the moment I don't know how many Europeans there are now? 17. We have to see. It's very important for a programme for the development of drivers. I think that this programme is quite weak everywhere. I think for the future, they definitely have to work a lot. It's very difficult to find how young drivers come to Formula One. I don't know how it can be changed for the future but I definitely think we have to work on programmes for driver development.

A huge German presence on the grid at the moment, Nico. Can you see that being maintained by a young driver programme in Germany?

NH: Which young driver programme? Is there one? I don't know. We don't keep track of that statistic. I think it will always be a good mixture between European and non-European drivers in the future.

To anyone, but Fernando and Sebastian particularly: following the rulings in the two Nico Rosberg incidents in Bahrain – one of which Fernando was involved in – are you clear in terms of what's allowed and what isn't when it comes to defending your position?

FA: Yes.

Has your understanding changed between before Bahrain to now?

FA: No, maybe I did...

SV: Fernando made it pretty clear. He said 'you have to leave the space. All the time you have to leave the space!'

FA: Yes. Yes.

SV: It was clear, no?

FA: As I did last year with Sebastian. In Monza.

That isn't what happened in Bahrain.

SV: He just thought my car was slimmer.

FA: But you passed. You passed.

SV: I think the rule is clear. You can argue. I think there were two incidents with Nico in Bahrain, one with Fernando and I think Fernando made his point clear afterwards. And with Lewis, and I think Lewis got past, so I think you can talk for hours now, but if you saw the situation in Bahrain, it's exceptional, because you have a kind of asphalt run-off. Yes, it's pretty dirty but we always try to go on the limit, the one who is overtaking, the one who is defending. Surely sometimes you need to respect that the guy is there and you need to leave the space. I think if it would have been grass, it would have been a different story. You wouldn't go there in the first place. In Fernando's case I think he would have made the same point.

Fernando and Pedro, if a fan of Formula One in Spain is thinking about coming here on Sunday, what are your goals for the race? What can you offer to the people?

DLR: Well, from our point of view, you know our goal is to fight and to improve from where we left it in Bahrain and that's all we can offer, we can promise. We cannot promise victories – we leave that for Fernando – but we will promise, wherever we finish, we will do it with the pride of being here and doing a serious job, giving it all, and maximising what we have.

FA: Same thing. And giving 100 percent. We cannot promise anything. This is not a mathematical problem, it's a sport, we all try to do our best so we will work hard, we will take care of every detail this weekend as we do normally, trying to do a serious job and hopefully finishing in the best position possible, but you cannot promise anything.

Leaving aside whether or not it's a home race for you guys, how much of a difference does it actually make for you to be back in Europe again? Kimi, you don't actually like the travelling very much out of Europe, do you?

KR: Yeah but I arrived in China on the Thursday morning, so arriving for a European race on the Thursday morning is no different really.
DLR: I'm biased answering this question because it's back to Europe, but especially it's back to Spain, so for us, it's a Grand Prix that arrives a little bit too early in our development programme, as far as I'm concerned. We have been improving since Australia but we probably need more Grands Prix to offer a more competitive show to our fans. That's the only downside, but nevertheless, we are here, we are in Spain. It's our home ground and we are very happy to be here. I'm looking forward to it. I used to live ten minutes away from the track and this is something that – when you grow up – you can always listen to the engines, so the Formula One cars, when you wake up every morning during the weekends – for me it's a very special event, absolutely.

Kamui, not so easy commuting from Japan.

KK: For sure. I'm used to being here a lot of times. I came to Europe 17 years ago and I've been here to Barcelona a lot of times. After long trips being back in Europe in Formula One is always great and it's always great to see the motorhomes in Barcelona. This is always great and it's always good to be back in Europe for Formula One.

SV: I think for all of us we're happy to race in Europe. Surely we have races overseas which we enjoy. For instance, we all love going to Australia. Yes, it's a long trip but once we are there I think we all enjoy being there and it's the same here. In the end, I don't think it makes a difference how long you travel. Yes, it is more convenient if you are only an hour, an hour and a half or two hours on the plane rather than twelve and then another twelve. As I said, I think every country we go to, there is a strong culture for motor sport. We hope for a lot of excitement and for a lot of people to come. It makes us feel very special when we are on the grid, to see that the grandstand is packed and usually around here are a lot of fans, cheering, especially for Fernando and the Spanish drivers, but it's the same when we go to Silverstone, they're cheering for their drivers. I think we can be very happy everywhere we go, and hopefully put on a great show so that the people enjoy it as well and they come back next year.

Gentlemen, after testing at Mugello, Vitaly Petrov criticised the circuit, because he expressed concern about its safety, so do you think he was wrong to express his concern like this? He was criticised by other drivers, because he expressed concern. Is he wrong?

FA: I think everyone will have his opinion. I'm not someone to say that Vitaly is right or wrong. It's more maybe the safety commission's job or whatever. Personally, everyone will have their opinion, as I said. I like Mugello, I like the layout, I like the feelings, the emotions that you have driving there. As I said after the test, driving one lap in Mugello is like driving one hundred at another circuit, for adrenalin and how much you enjoy the lap. We were in Italy, with a lot of Ferrari support. I enjoy those three days testing so much, but in terms of how safe the track was or not, I don't have the information to give an answer.

NH: Personally I enjoyed Mugello very much. I think it's a very different circuit to all the others that we go to. You always feel like you're flying there, a lot of fourth, fifth, sixth gear action which is great to have. Like Fernando said, whether you feel safe or not is a very personal thing. I think it was OK.

KK: That's a great circuit. There are a lot of very safe circuits like Abu Dhabi without gravel, but this circuit had gravel and if we made a mistake we ended up in the gravel which is good for drivers and good for training and testing. The test was something we had to try and in the race, of course we have to stay on the track and it's difficult to take a lot of risks but during testing we can take more risks to improve our driving. It's great for me.

SV: Well, the first time I heard that he was saying something about safety at Mugello. I think we all loved the track because it's different – like Nico said, there's a lot of high speed corners. Sure, if the speeds are high, there is higher risk. There is obviously quite a lot of run-off but surely here and there you would like to have more. As long as nothing happens, everything is fine; if something happens... it's always easy to say something after there's an incident and say this and that. I think it was not as if we felt we were scared. We left the garage feeling safe. I think if we would race there one day, potentially yes or no, then surely here or there you can argue to make improvements for safety, but I think they did everything they could on the day.

Nico mentioned that Mugello is different from every other track that you guys race on in the year so does this very fact make it less useful to have tested there instead of somewhere else?

KK: Difficult. I think maybe it's not really useful for mechanical stuff but definitely useful for aero development at least, because we can test the aero on the straights. Difficult to see the stability in the corner. Basically I think this was a good test.

SV: I agree. I think it was good to test some parts of the car, not for some others, but like all the other circuits. When we test in Jerez, test in Barcelona, we try different things. I remember in the old days testing in Paul Ricard. Some days we test on the 50s lap circuit because we were testing for Monaco Grand Prix: different tyres and different parts, so every test is welcome for different areas of the car, but it's good. For people who don't like Mugello there is a very easy solution.

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – F1 report

They may have called it free practice, but the morning session at the Circuit de Catalunya was little more than an extension of last week's in-season test at Mugello.

Cars left the pitlane decked out in flo-viz paint and aero sensors designed to help the teams determine which of the new parts were working as intended, and which ones were destined to return to the drawing board.

The list of new components on display this morning was so long that it's impossible to put together an exhaustive list. But it shouldn't surprise anyone to learn that – as is usually the case in this aero-dominated era – the bulk of new parts on display were designed to increase aerodynamic advantage.

To that end we saw new front and rear wings from a number of teams, although not all of the new components – even those that pass muster – are destined for use in Sunday's race. Rather, Barcelona's status as one of the more complete circuits on the calendar allows teams to use the three practice sessions of the Spanish Grand Prix weekend to do more in-depth analysis of forthcoming components than other tracks allow.

One of the most obvious new parts on display this morning was a new nosecone for McLaren. The latest model saw a higher nose than the Woking team usually deliver, but avoids the unattractive platypus nose most teams went for at the start of the season.

Jenson Button was the first of the McLaren drivers to try the new nosecone, while Lewis Hamilton's morning began with a rake test to monitor airflow.

Less obvious to the naked eye was Ferrari's new diffuser, which saw Fernando Alonso to the top of the timesheets after the Spanish driver spent much of the session in the garage without a time lap to his name. Given that their rivals were all testing new parts, not chasing times, it remains to be seen whether Alonso's pace represents a turnaround for the F2012 or whether the Scuderia wanted to give the Spanish driver's many fans something to celebrate.

The diffuser is but one part of a significant upgrade package that Ferrari have brought to Barcelona; despite winning the Malaysian Grand Prix the F2012 continues to be a problem for the Scuderia, and the team are desperately trying to give their drivers a more consistent car.

Another team running a raft of upgrades this morning was Lotus. The Enstone racers elected to test some new parts at Mugello last week while a raft of other components were shipped to the United States, where they underwent Windshear testing at a full-sized wind tunnel. It is those parts that we have seen in action this morning.

While a quick glance at the timesheets might indicate that Lotus have more work to do, it would be foolish to underestimate them at this juncture – the boys in black and gold are generally thought to be the ones to watch this weekend, and well overdue for a win.

One factor affecting their performance this morning was issues with Romain Grosjean's ride height. Once that was rectified towards the end of the session, the Frenchman was able to deliver a competitive set of times.

F1 times (unofficial)

1. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.24.430s [20 laps]
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.24.808s [18 laps]
3. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.24.912s [28 laps]
4. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.24.996s [24 laps]
5. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1.25.120s [24 laps]
6. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.25.187s [15 laps]
7. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.25.217s [16 laps]
8. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.25.252s [20 laps]
9. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.25.285s [29 laps]
10. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.25.339s [24 laps]
11. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.25.367s [22 laps]
12. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.25.433s [21 laps]
13. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.25.539s [23 laps]
14. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.25.607s [20 laps]
15. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.25.918s [19 laps]
16. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.26.226s [24 laps]
17. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.26.297s [18 laps]
18. Jules Bianchi (Force India) 1.26.630s [21 laps]
19. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.27.475s [20 laps]
20. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.28.267s [21 laps]
21. Alexander Rossi (Caterham) 1.28.448s [23 laps]
22. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.28.633s [22 laps]
23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.29.107s [19 laps]
24. Dani Clos (HRT) 1.31.618s [19 laps]

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – FP2 report

While the afternoon's running at the Circuit de Catalunya continued to see teams appraise new parts and tweak set-ups, it was not as obvious a test session as FP1.

There was significantly more running and less evaluation on offer than in the morning, and 21 lap times were up on the board within 15 minutes of the pit lane opening, a dramatic improvement on the morning's efforts in a similar timeframe.

Within half an hour, teams began to bring their drivers in to switch from Pirelli's hard tyre compound to the soft, and lap times fell drastically on a warming track.

This weekend performance on the softer compound – and intimate knowledge of its wear and degradation rates in the dry Catalonian heat – could be the difference between a podium and a finish outside the points. Pirelli have elected to step the compounds, giving the teams a choice of hard or soft, with a view to shaking up the tyre strategies.

But given the added pace on offer on the softer compounds, teams re expected to save as many sets as possible for Sunday's race, giving their drivers the best possible advantage. As a consequence, most expect to see limited running during FP3 and the latter stages of qualifying.

With soft tyre runs and data under their belts, the afternoon's running settled into a peaceful stride marred only by a few offs.

Mark Webber went off at Turn 4, and scattered gravel across the track in the process, leading to some cautious driving for his opponents, all of whom were unwilling to sacrifice a tyre to the sharp stones. The Australian's floor suffered minor damage as a result of his brief foray into the kitty litter, and Red Bull's mechanics could be seen working on the car when Webber returned to the garage.

The next man off was HRT's Narain Karthikeyan, who spent the first hour of the session waiting in the garage as his team fixed an electrical fault with the car. But on his second lap of the day – and before the Indian driver was able to set a timed lap – Karthikeyan's car stopped at Turn 3, beached in the gravel. The team have yet to specify the precise nature of the problem.

Heikki Kovalainen had a brief run through the gravel in his Caterham, while Sauber's Sergio Perez mimicked Webber's Turn 4 off not long before the session drew to a close.

While fans of Fernando Alonso might lose heart at the Ferrari driver's position in the timesheets, it is worth remembering that times set in practice mean very little – the combination of varying test programmes and different fuel weights see to that.

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.23.399s [38 laps]
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.23.563s [38 laps]
3. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.23.771s [41 laps]
4. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.23.909s [32 laps]
5. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.23.918s [32 laps]
6. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.23.964s [37 laps]
7. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.24.065s [34 laps]
8. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.24.080s [36 laps]
9. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.24.214s [41 laps]
10. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.24.365s [22 laps]
11. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.24.418s [35 laps]
12. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.24.422s [32 laps]
13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.24.468s [40 laps]
14. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.24.600s [33 laps]
15. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.24.688s [30 laps]
16. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.24.733s [34 laps]
17. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.24.769s [37 laps]
18. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.25.047s [42 laps]
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.26.296s [36 laps]
20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.26.740s [35 laps]
21. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.27.314s [27 laps]
22. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.27.664s [30 laps]
23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.28.253s [26 laps]
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) NO TIME SET [2 laps]

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – Friday press conference

With senior team personnel lined up to face the media, the big questions on Friday afternoon in the Barcelona paddock all concentrated on tests – Mugello and YDT.

Present were Giorgio Ascanelli (Toro Rosso), Paul Hembery (Pirelli), Sam Michael (McLaren), Adrian Newey (Red Bull), Mark Smith (Caterham), and Pierre Wache (Sauber).

Pierre, welcome, you're Head of Vehicle Performance at Sauber. First of all, give us some indication of Mugello testing. Were your findings confirmed here? Were you satisfied with the test?

Pierre WACHE: Thank you for the welcome. We evaluated a new package and we were happy to do this test for sure in the middle of the season to evaluate the new aero package. We did it again today and confirmed what we found in Mugello.

Your drivers have seemed easier on the tyres in the first couple of grands prix this year. How did they extract that performance in the first couple of races but not in the next couple?

PW: All the races are different, all the layouts are different and the last circuit maybe suited our car less than the other ones.

That's the only reason?

PW: I think so, yes.

And when it comes to this race?

PW: I hope it will be OK. We will see tomorrow.

It's an interesting new partnership with Chelsea Football Club. Does that include more resources. Is there a possibility for expansion in terms of resources?

PW: I don't know. I'm not really the right person to give this answer. I think you will have to ask Peter Sauber for that.

Paul, a different range of tyres this year in terms of specification. How much has the game changed this year in terms of that specification change?

Paul HEMBERY: Predominantly the compound choices have been a little bit more aggressive. If I take the scaling, the Supersoft tyre stays the same, the Soft tyre this year is derived from the Supersoft, and the Medium tyre this year is actually a close relation in terms of compounding to the Soft tyre of last year. So, there are some similarities to last year but the Hard tyre in particular is very much different. If we think about last year when we were here, the harder tyre in particular created quite a few struggles for the teams to get working. There were probably only two drivers in that race

that got it working. So, yes there have been some changes.

We've heard a lot about tyre temperature recently – degradation, wear etc. Can you just explain to us, because I think the media need an explanation, about what the difference is and how they affect the cars?

PH: Degradation is a thermal performance loss – that's from the tyres overheating essentially, taken to extremes in terms of lap time. Wear is the physical wear of the tyre which is probably easier for people to understand. The two are linked, though not necessarily in a parallel manner, but they are linked. The temperature, well, working range is something people hear a lot about. Last year we were finding that the Soft tyre, if we take that as a good example, had a working range from 20 degrees all the way through to the late 30s. This season we've seen that when the temperature dropped dramatically in Shanghai that caused quite a dramatic change in tyre performance when it went below 20 degrees. So there's probably some sensitivity there, and depending on the cars we were looking at we could see that the actual temperature of the tyres was less, so we have to imagine there's less energy going into the tyre. At the other end because we've taken a more aggressive approach to compounding you'll find that when it gets to the other extremes of temperature, with abrasion or certainly wheel spin then we will go into an overheating mode. We've closed down the range of compounds and the cars have obviously changed as well, and you put that combination together and you have a start to the season pretty much as we saw last year – some question marks that tend to get ironed out as the season goes on and the teams get to understand better the cars, the tyres how to get the best out of them all. I think you'll see over the next few races that that will be the case.

How concerned are you about the drop in temperature we're expecting on Sunday? We saw 44 degrees today but apparently it will be at least 10 less on Sunday.

PH: No. As I mentioned it's more likely when you go below 20 degrees, when it's cooler. It'll probably be in Germany or at Silverstone where we'll get more of an issue with that.

No problem?

PH: No.

Mark, welcome to you here. Maybe we were wrong but we perhaps expected more from Caterham this year. What can be done to improve it? What did you find in Mugello? Has it improved since Mugello?

Mark SMITH: It's perhaps not unreasonable to have expected more us as a team. I think we're all a little bit disappointed with where we are. We want to perform better. I feel we've made progress since last year. You have to look and measure your performance relative to the teams you're competitive with and I think we have made some progress but it's clearly not enough, it's not where we want to be. I think it's part of being a relatively immature team, even though there are many people in the team with experience. To make the team gel and to provide the tools to actually take the team forward takes a little bit of time. I genuinely think we are on the road to putting those tools in place, whether it's personnel or hardware or software, that's what we're working hard on at the moment. In terms of Mugello, it was useful for further developments that we're making in the aero world. I think it's fairly obvious that's the area we need to make significant improvement in. In terms of what we took there and why it's not here, in reality we had to commit to something because of the timing of the Mugello test that we hadn't fully developed in CFD or the wind tunnel environment.

What about the performance of the drivers? It's interesting that Heikki has out-qualified his team-mate four to one, but Vitaly has out-raced his team-mate four to zero.

MS: I think that as a team we're very happy with both drivers. Vitaly joining the team has been a breath of fresh air for all of us. We've got two drivers who are both very motivated and give of their best at all times and at all locations. We're totally happy with them.

Giorgio, welcome again. I mentioned the other day the pace of development. The factory as a whole has expanded – you have more space for development, more space for people. Is that the case? Is there more development coming from the team now?

Giorgio ASCANELLI: It is the case indeed. The straight answer is: Do we get more bits? Yes, we do. Are they good bits? Sometimes.

So what did you learn in Mugello?

GA: Half the things we brought to Mugello worked, half didn't. We have to keep looking at it. We couldn't react on the parts that weren't working for here. I think we'll have another stab at it Canada because Monaco is no place to do this kind of work.

Interesting that the consistency hasn't always been there. We saw a remarkable performance from Daniel [Ricciardo], who put in his best ever qualifying in Bahrain but it didn't seem to continue in the race itself.

GA: I would say we have been consistently slow apart from the qualifying in Bahrain, which was really a flower. So, what do you make of it. Not much. First race – since I'm Toro Rosso we've always scored points [there]. No matter what. No matter whether we have the previous year's car or we've made our own car, it means we are trying to come prepared to the first race and maybe someone else doesn't. Second race was a rolling dice. Third race we were extremely happy... No, in China we had a technical problem that we fought for the whole weekend and in Bahrain we were extremely happy with qualifying and not so happy after the race.

Adrian and Sam, interesting to see both your teams today seeming to do a lot more work on the car, seeming to do perhaps more than usual. Was this a continuation today of the Mugello test? Were you still working on test parts?

Adrian NEWEY: I wouldn't say this weekend has been any different to the first four races from how we've approached the weekend and so forth.

Sam?

Sam MICHAEL: It's pretty similar for us as well. We've had a pretty intensive Friday programme of bringing upgrades and taking lots of measurements throughout P1 and P2 and we had a few bits that we carried over from Mugello to finish off but we would have had a very similar programme whether we went to Mugello or not. All the teams are geared up to not have testing, to not having test teams and that means we're equipped and do our planning to do all of that work on Friday. So, it wasn't any different for us here.

How important to both of you was that Mugello test? For instance, Sam, your race drivers didn't take part in it, whereas Adrian, your race drivers did. How important was it?

SM: From our point of view it was interesting because we used it to get correlation. All of our testing is to do with correlation now. It's not to dial in the last little bit of the setup. And by running our two test drivers there we get a straight back-to-back with the guys that do the majority of the running in our simulator. So, that's quite important for us to verify all of our models. I think the test itself, personally, I think you could do without it. I think it's a lot of energy and expense during the season that we probably don't need. Of course McLaren will gain a lot out of that test but Formula One

is all relative, so all we really did was spend a load of money. And did we really shift relative to Red Bull or Ferrari or Mercedes and the people who we're competing against? I don't think so.

Adrian, do you feel the same way?

AN: I think we learnt the pasta in Italy is still the best in the world and that's about it really. I'd agree with what Sam says. To me, yes you go to the test because it's available. We didn't learn anything... relatively speaking. I think Sam's point is valid. We all spent money but the value of in-season testing has to be questionable.

Adrian, in terms of driver performance this year, how much has changed do you think? Do you think anything has changed between Sebastian Vettel and Mark Webber in the first four grands prix of this year?

AN: No, obviously Sebastian's confidence is high and Mark is very talented and keeps working so I think y'know, generally Sebastian's had slightly better results but it's been close and I'm very happy with both of them.

Sam, it's a little bit of a mystery that when you were at Williams you were technical director there and now you're sporting director - could you explain how your duties have changed?

SM: Sure. I work for the senior management group, which means that I work with all the engineering and technical directors at McLaren. My main responsibility is the race track and the drivers but I work within that group in the factory to make McLaren a faster car and a better place.

Very often the sporting director is seen almost as a team manager.

SM: I think if you look in different teams, everyone has different titles, it doesn't really mean... it doesn't necessarily related to what they do within that team.

Question to Sam and Adrian. So many times since in-season testing was banned we've heard teams and drivers bemoan the fact there is no in-season testing, that they can't test things, they can't improve the car etc. So why are you two guys now bemoaning the fact that we've just had an in-season test and you learnt nothing from it? Sure that was the whole point of having an in-season test, that you do learn things from it and you move forward.

AN: Neither of us is saying that we haven't learnt anything from it, it's just, has it brought anything in particular of real value? And obviously because Formula One is a relative sport and in particular relative to your competition and, as Sam said, since those comments were made we've had three years, or whatever it is, of no in-season testing. We've all learnt how to use Fridays more effectively as test sessions, so the value of in-season testing has depleted because of that.

SM: same comments

Now that you've answered that question, do you think that in-season testing would be more useful later in the season?

AN: I guess if you wanted to use it as research for the following year's car, possibly. But I think the fact is Formula One budget-wise is... things are tight for a lot of teams and the most expensive thing to do is run the car. That's far more expensive than wind tunnel testing or CFD or simulators and whatever else you might like to name. If one of the major things is to save costs then I think in-season testing would be one of the relatively low-hanging fruit.

Anyone else have any further comment on that, Giorgio?

GA: Well, things are extremely profitable when they are the same all the time. A team evolves itself to adapt to the conditions of operation which are offered. If you change something you need a different operation. I think that's what these two gentlemen have tried to say. They are both structured team with a lot of infrastructure. For us it's a blessing to be able to drive - because we don't have the infrastructure. Although I agree with Adrian: the most expensive way to make experience it going around a circuit. If you don't, and you have a simulator and a good tunnel you make a good profit. If you haven't got a simulator and haven't got a good tunnel then you need some running to certify what you do.

Mark, anything to add?

MS: Nothing particularly different to add.

Pierre?

PW: Nothing to add, no.

Paul, did it make a big difference as far as you were concerned or just expense?

PH: Just expense I guess. But, y'know, we have to follow what the desires of the teams are. I think if we were to get any use, it would be to go to one of the tracks where we actually run a Formula One race, [that] would have been more useful to us.

Giorgio, you have worked with some of the true greats of our sport, you're now with a smaller team. I wonder if you would tell us if you see any signs of potential greatness in your drivers and specifically, can you tell us about the moments in the season so far when you've been most impressed by each of the two drivers?

A: I think I already said that I think the qualifying in Bahrain from Daniel has been quite extraordinary. It wasn't just one lap, the last lap, it was the whole of Q1 - all runs in Q1, in Q2 and Q3 were extremely good. It was sort of what I've already said about Sebastian Vettel when he set the famous lap - which I've quoted many times - in Valencia when he was running on full tanks and on used tyres and the lap time was, to my eyes, quite exceptional. I think that Sebastian made a big step that day when he noticed that and he thought about it and he could repeat it. Unfortunately we cannot repeat it yet because the race was another story. It's down to the drivers to find the answers in themselves and in us to help them finding answers. I would say that Daniel has done something that is quite extraordinary. Jev (Jean-Eric Vergne) has a big heart, he is one of the best fuel controllers that I have seen in my life but this is only his fifth event and I think we have to wait a little bit.

This year, we have three teams registered to ASNs from outside of Europe: India, Malaysia and Russia. I'm just wondering if any of you guys can point at any time in the future when a team can actually be based outside of Europe, working from outside of Europe. I know there were some rumours about Abu Dhabi in the past with Toro Rosso and you've obviously got Malaysia with Caterham as well.

SM: I think it's possible but whether it can be competitive will depend on... Strong Formula One teams are made up of good people; whether they can attract enough good people, that will be the critical thing. It's definitely possible from a manufacturing point of view and setting up equipment and

designer, test facilities. That can be done anywhere within reason, but you need, to be competitive in Formula One, you have to attract good people, it's whether they could cross that boundary.

Paul, Michael Schumacher, as I'm sure you're aware, was particularly critical of Pirelli post-Bahrain. I just wondered if, as far as you know, he's a lone voice in the wilderness, first of all? What did you make of his comments? Secondly, he mentioned yesterday that he held a meeting with Pirelli in Mugello. I just wondered if he came away from that with a better understanding of what you guys are trying to achieve this season?

PH: Yeah, he had a meeting with some of our engineers – to be honest, it was a little bit more general than just talking about Bahrain, it was trying to understand what we're doing with testing, future development, the way we're going forward and maybe hearing from ourselves of some of the constraints we have. Michael's obviously a great champion, he's been the most successful Formula One driver so of course we listen to the comments, but we also have lots of comments from other drivers and until they all say the same thing... We were given an input when we started our adventure in Formula One and we're still following that, so while we obviously respect it, it's one of a number and we carry on doing our work.

Question for McLaren: there were a lot of comments about the nose of the car at the beginning of the season. Now you've changed it. How much of a marketing tool was it and how much of a technical advantage can it be now?

SM: The change that we've made here for this weekend is part of the normal development of the car. Obviously we haven't changed our chassis and we wouldn't plan to do that during the season but you're always exploring things like that, whether it's the nose, bodywork or wings, all over the car, regardless of what other teams are doing. It's definitely not a marketing tool. The only reason why we change the car is to improve the aerodynamic efficiency. Here we do have a new nose to evaluate but I would not call it a first order or barely even a second order factor in car performance.

A question on the young driver test; you have the option of Silverstone or Abu Dhabi. There seems to have been some criticism of late about the plans to run in Silverstone, so I was wondering if the five team figures could let me know how they feel about Silverstone, and separately, Paul, for Pirelli, you're going to have two costs now. How do you feel about that?

PH: I think it's probably easier for me to start. To be honest, officially, we've only had indications from the teams testing in Abu Dhabi. Formally, we haven't had any indication about Silverstone yet, although verbally we did have a conversation, so we would be keen to know if Silverstone is going to happen or not.

GA: We have budgeted our resources to support 15 days of testing and we were counting on the fact that eventually the young driver test would occur at the end of the year, so that we could sustain it with the engine mileage which was left over from the races, so a second test in the middle of the season which wasn't planned, for us, is half a million? We don't have it.

AN: To be honest, I think, if you go back to the essence of what the test is meant to be for, which is to develop young drivers, it's down to: are you best off evaluating prospective new young drivers in the middle of the season or at the end of the season. Personally, I would have thought at the end of the season because they're not at a junior formula they've been competing in, they've finished their championship, you can see how they've gone, they've got a bit more experience. To drop them into a Formula One car in the middle of the season and then hoof them out again and tell them to wait until another eight months before you drive it again - I'm not sure of the value of that.

SM: I've got exactly the same view as Giorgio and Adrian. Our plan at McLaren at the moment is to test in Abu Dhabi. We're not testing at Silverstone for all those reasons. Engines is a significant factor, as Giorgio said. If you want to test at the end of the year, you have so many part-mileage engines with the race team that all have a little bit of mileage on them so you can effectively do it for free, in terms of your race engines. If you try and do that in the middle of the year, you can't use your race engines so you have to prepare a special test engine. And also the point that Adrian made is very important, I think, because if you try and have it in the middle of the year, and run your young drivers, then you are running them in the middle of their championship year so you to be at the end, so that they have finished their Formula Three or Formula Two or whatever they're doing and they have the capacity to concentrate on their Formula One test.

PW: For us it's quite different. The better compromise in terms of cost would be to test at Silverstone for plenty of reasons: for logistics and costs. It would be better to test at Silverstone.

MS: It's the same for us: logistically and cost-wise, Silverstone sits better for us.

I have a question for the gentlemen in the front row; you've already been in Formula One for a long time. How would you compare or judge or comment on the role and significance of the tyres over three periods, maybe the tyre war, the Bridgestone control tyre and now in the Pirelli era tyre?

SM: The tyres have always been very sensitive, the racing tyres. At the moment, you have an extremely close grid because of the technical regulations and if you look now at the spread from the top 15 teams (drivers) is sometimes this year only one second, so if you have a small variation in your tyre grip, where normally if you have a five or six tenths advantage on the next team, it wouldn't normally change your position by one or two places, normally you will drop ten positions if you fall out of that window. But there's been plenty of years previously where we've had extremely sensitive tyres to temperature or anything else so I think they are sensitive, but it's really magnified at the moment because of the closeness of the grid. You pay the penalty very badly if you fall out of that window.

AN: I agree with that. The grid is very tight. The tyres are clearly different to use compared to the Michelins and Bridgestones, just different, not to say better or worse, it's different, a fresh set of challenges which is good in many ways, I think. If you compare them to let's say the height of the tyre war between Michelin and Bridgestone, then you got to the point where the race was really a series of qualifying laps and the drivers would therefore push very hard, through the race without worrying too much about degradation, be it thermal or wear. That's different now. I think that brings a different set of skills to the floor, it's almost a bit like Prost in the eighties, when he got the reputation for being The Professor, thinking about how he did the race, and I think that's coming back which I think gives some variety, it gives some change in the field both race-to-race, during the race, qualifying to race. I think that's all good for the sport, good for spectating.

GA: The car is stuck to the ground because of four contact points and they are the tyres and I would say that after drivers, tyres have always been the most important element of competition, so it doesn't matter very much if there is competition between tyre manufacturers or not. You've got to know them, you've got to try to understand them. I think that what has changed over these twenty years – nearly thirty now – is the understanding and of modelling which is available to us, which in reality wasn't available to us thirty years ago when we had to rely on the feeling of the driver which is still important. There is so much the driver can feel. The nurturing of the grip level, the two temperatures that Paul was describing, how you find them and how you cultivate that, how you keep the tyres into it, is probably still one of the arts of a champion and I don't think it's pretty much in our hands.

Paul, do you see Pirelli changing its approach to the compounds to the point of them playing as big a role as they do now? I mean lowering the degradation levels, really lowering them, and to the teams, because we heard a few drivers talking about it: would that be something that you want?

PH: We work on the input from the teams, so if the teams want us to take a different approach we can go back to an approach which is probably more akin to what you'd be doing in a tyre competition. As Adrian just mentioned, you could push harder with very minimal degradation. You then started getting into areas of tyre integrity because you start pushing the boundaries of performance of the tyre but it depends on what the challenge is. We'll do whatever the sport wants us to do and at the moment, I think if you're looking from the outside, at the start of the season of course the tyres are very important, but as I mentioned earlier on, that's the teams getting used to what would be for them, maybe changes to the car, slightly different change from ourselves in terms of challenge. As the season progresses you will see that they will master that. They are very good, all these gentlemen around here, very very competent and very amazing teams of engineers working for them. If I took the first winter testing when we came back into the sport, you would have thought we would be doing 25 tyre changes for a race. On the same tyre at the end of the season, they were getting probably 25 to thirty laps out of the same tyre. Things change and the importance for everybody is that they have the same challenge. The engineers and the teams will find their solutions, and as the gentlemen have said, the drivers can also provide some solutions to that.

AN: I think first and foremost, the reason that we're here is because people are watching it on television so for the good of the sport, it should not actually be our choice, it should be what do people enjoy watching?

MS: I think that's a perfectly reasonable approach. In any case, I think a team only has so much energy to bring to bear on the task at hand and for us, as a small team, we've got bigger fish to fry than to try and influence the tyres. We're perfectly happy with what we have. It's a challenge and one that occupies us.

SM: From that point of view, I think the racing's been very good. It makes our job extremely difficult but that's what we're here for, isn't it? As long as you have the consistency of being able to put on a tyre that's the same every time, which from our experience with Pirelli it is like that, so then you're just limited by your ability to understand the tyre, then it's how good a technical job you do with it. And you can't really argue that it hasn't made the racing very good this year. We're happy with it.

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – FP3 report

With only an hour in which to complete their final pre-qualifying set-up analyses, the drivers were quick to leave the pitlane when it opened for the last practice session of the Spanish Grand Prix at the Circuit de Catalunya.

First man on track was Kamui Kobayashi, but within five minutes 21 of the 24 runners had installation laps under their belts. There was then a brief lull before the session began in earnest.

The big story of the morning came very early on, when Romain Grosjean stopped his Lotus on track at Turn 10 seventeen minutes after the pitlane opened. By the time the E20 was returned to the pits, there wasn't enough time to fix the car and get the Frenchman back out on track.

Lotus have been hotly tipped as the team to beat this weekend, thanks to the combination of a strong car, two tenacious drivers, and good pace on the long runs. But with Grosjean sidelined by a fuel pressure problem, and Kimi Raikkonen complaining of understeer, the first Lotus (Renault) win since Japan 2008 might take a little longer than hoped.

One thing that was made abundantly clear this morning was that the Circuit de Catalunya – remarkably for F1's favourite test track – isn't performing as expected.

Ordinarily, the surplus of testing telemetry makes racing in Barcelona somewhat predictable. But Pirelli's brave decision to step the compounds has shaken things up somewhat, with drivers still struggling to make the most of the soft compound while a number of men found it a challenge to get the hards up to temperature, even with the track's surface hovering around 40 degrees.

Jenson Button has been one of the highest-profile drivers to complain of his difficulties with the hard compound in Barcelona, and the Briton's issues were further compounded this morning by a lack of rear traction.

Both Button and McLaren teammate Lewis Hamilton were seen sporting the higher nose that made its debut at last week's Mugello test. Hamilton has not had any difficulty adjusting to the new nose, which the 2008 world champion said felt no different to the version the team have been running since the start of the season.

Sauber look like they should be a force to be reckoned with this weekend – we've already seen that the car is gentle on its tyres, they've got established long-run pace, and FP3 showed that both Sergio Perez and Kamui Kobayashi are more than capable of putting together a blisteringly quick lap on the softer compound.

FP3 times (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.23.168s [13 laps]
2. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.23.336s [19 laps]
3. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.23.350s [19 laps]
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.23.578s [16 laps]
5. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.23.742s [22 laps]
6. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.23.807s [15 laps]
7. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.23.833s [14 laps]
8. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.23.909s [13 laps]
9. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.23.936s [16 laps]
10. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.24.070s [24 laps]
11. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.24.179s [16 laps]
12. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.24.323s [17 laps]
13. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.24.331s [15 laps]
14. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.24.409s [18 laps]
15. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.24.599s [15 laps]

16. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.24.778s [15 laps]
 17. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.24.825s [17 laps]
 18. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.25.911s [20 laps]
 19. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.26.587s [20 laps]
 20. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.27.469s [18 laps]
 21. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.27.689s [16 laps]
 22. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.28.207s [24 laps]
 23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.28.373s [13 laps]
 24. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) NO TIME SET [2 laps]
-

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – Q1 report

Qualifying at the Spanish Grand Prix roared into life when the pitlane opened for business.

Oh, wait a minute, I've got that all wrong. The first four minutes – twenty percent of the session, facts fans – saw no running at all. But Paul di Resta wins the race to be the first man on track moments before the Lotus pair broke the silence with the roar of a pair of Renault engines leaving the pits and giving the paying fans part of the show they'd come to watch.

Tyre strategy was always going to form an important part of this afternoon's qualifying session, but it was a surprise to see such a delay to the start to Q1, a time when the slower teams traditionally try and set bankers on the hards before moving to the softs for a late flyer.

While both Kimi Raikkonen and Romain Grosjean are strong contenders for podia or a possible win tomorrow, neither man set the world alight with his first timed lap this afternoon.

Times at the top are fruitless to track at this stage in the game, as it's the men at the bottom who count. With the session half run, only 16 drivers had times on the board, leaving Bruno Senna, Felipe Massa, Vitaly Petrov, Pedro de la Rosa, Narain Karthikeyan, Pastor Maldonado, Sebastian Vettel, and Mark Webber in the theoretical dropout zone.

Don't expect that to last...

And it didn't, with times now on the board from 20 of the 24 runners. Maldonado, Vettel, and Webber are yet to set times, but the Venezuelan driver is currently on a flying lap and has gone purple in the first sector.

With seven minutes remaining, the Red Bull pair are still in the pits.

Maldonado goes fastest on his first timed lap, and the dropout zone now contains Heikki Kovalainen, Charles Pic, Timo Glock, de la Rosa, Karthikeyan, and the Red Bull pair.

Jenson Button, currently safe in P8, radios the team to complain of understeer, a problem that has dogged him for much of the weekend.

Five minutes to go, and Vettel and Webber take to the track at last. Of the men who have set times thus far, only Karthikeyan is at risk of failing to make the 107 percent cut-off time of 1.29.216s; the Indian racer's best lap so far clocks in at 1.31.122s.

Vettel crosses the line in P2 with his first timed lap, while Webber makes it through in P3. There are just under three minutes remaining, and the track is heaving with traffic.

At two minutes remaining, the dropout zone is comprised of the six usual suspects plus Daniel Ricciardo, who is currently on a flyer. The Australian's first sector time matches that of Maldonado's best lap, while his second sector is three-tenths down. Unless he makes a major error in S3, Ricciardo should be safe this session. And he is.

Senna is now the man to watch: the Brazilian driver is in P18 and struggling to put together a decent sector two.

The chequered flag has fallen, and Senna joins the band of six in the Q1 dropout zone. His bad day is capped with a nasty spin into the gravel at Turn 12. Ouch.

Dropout zone

18. Bruno Senna (Williams)
19. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
20. Charles Pic (Marussia)
21. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham)
22. Timo Glock (Marussia)
23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT)
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)*

* Karthikeyan's time was not within the 107 percent limit; he was nearly three seconds shy of the best time in Q1 and may not be allowed to race tomorrow.

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – Q2 report

The second part of qualifying started with a similar whimper to Q1, with several minutes of pitlane silence.

When the action finally started, thirteen of the seventeen runners flooded onto the track, leaving only Kimi Raikkonen, Romain Grosjean, Daniel Ricciardo, and Jean-Eric Vergne sitting pretty in the pits.

The likely candidates for pole this afternoon (Lotus excepted) have all put on a strong showing so far, with Lewis Hamilton and Jenson Button sitting atop the timesheets – despite Button's issues with understeer – before Mark Webber split them.

Vettel is currently sitting in P5, with Nico Rosberg in P4 and Michael Schumacher in P6, but Raikkonen and Grosjean are highly likely to shake up that order once they complete their first timed laps.

While this weekend has yet to provide any definite answers as regards form for the summer, McLaren, Red Bull, Mercedes, and Lotus are all expected to perform well this afternoon. No surprises thus far...

The track is now nearly empty, with only the Lotus and Toro Rosso drivers currently running. We're still waiting on their first timed laps, and they're leaving it fairly late with less than four minutes remaining. Any problems in the kitty litter and their afternoons (and weekends) will be ruined.

Raikkonen's first timed lap sees him in P2, while Vergne crosses the line in P4 before he and the Finn are both pushed down a notch by Grosjean's P2-worthy time. Ricciardo's first effort, meanwhile, sees the Australian in a precarious P8.

With slightly more than two minutes remaining, the track is filling up again. Thirteen of the seventeen runners are out on track, and the dropout zone is changing all the time.

Currently at risk of falling out with the chequered flag are Felipe Massa, Michael Schumacher, Sergio perez, Pastor Maldonado, Kamui Kobayashi, and Nico Hulkenberg, while Sebastian Vettel is sitting on the precipice in P10.

As I type, Vettel is knocked down to P11, and then saves himself by crossing the line in P5.

The dropout zone now contains Vergne, Nico Rosberg, Ricciardo, Massa, Schumacher, Perez, and Maldonado. But Perez saves himself, as does Schumacher. Maldonado goes fastest, and it's chaos in the dropout zone.

Button gets knocked out, as does Webber.

At final count, the dropout zone is Button, Webber, di Resta Hulkenberg, Vergne, Ricciardo, and Massa.

After the chequered flag fell, Kobayashi stopped on track. With no explanation, it looked as though he'd run out of fuel.

Dropout zone

11. Jenson Button (McLaren)
12. Mark Webber (Red Bull)
13. Paul di Resta (Force India)
14. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India)
15. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso)
16. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso)
17. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – Q3 report

Contrary to expectation, a car was waiting at the pitlane exit for the light to go green – Sebastian Vettel was keen to set a time as quickly as possible in Q3.

But this has been an afternoon of surprises, not least the departures of Jenson Button and Mark Webber in Q2.

Another surprise came in the form of Vettel abandoning his timed lap, despite the need to preserve as much rubber as possible for tomorrow's race. The Red Bull driver had a very slow first sector, which probably explains it.

One man almost certain not to run in this session is Sauber's Kamui Kobayashi. The Japanese driver stopped on track at the end of Q2, and the odds of getting his car back to the garage, refuelled and reshod, and back out on track in time to start a timed lap before the chequered flag falls are slimmer than your average grid girl.

With three and a half minutes remaining, only Hamilton has a time on the board. That benchmark? 1:22.560s, a time not under threat from the efforts of Nico Rosberg, the only other man currently on a timed lap.

Two and a half minutes to go and the cars are slowly emerging from the garages. This has been a highly valuable session for paying fans who might have hoped to see some running for the price of their tickets.

One and a half minutes to go and everyone barring Michael Schumacher is out on track. Kobayashi's car is still working its way back to the pits after Q2.

Fernando Alonso takes provisional pole, but Kimi Raikkonen is on a flyer. The Lotus driver crosses the line in provisional P2, while Sergio Perez slips in at P3. Grosjean crosses the line in P2, while Pastor Maldonado takes provisional pole with his first effort.

Hamilton reclaims the top slot, while Vettel abandons his lap, presumably with a view to saving tyres for the race.

The McLaren driver's pole lap was a blistering 1:21.707s, half a second faster than Maldonado in P2. With all times now on the board, Alonso is a second-row surprise at his home grand prix, where he is joined by Romain Grosjean.

Provisional grid

1. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren)
2. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)
3. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
4. Romain Grosjean (Lotus)
5. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus)
6. Sergio Perez (Sauber)
7. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes)
8. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)
9. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
10. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
11. Jenson Button (McLaren)
12. Mark Webber (Red Bull)
13. Paul di Resta (Force India)
14. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India)
15. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso)
16. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso)
17. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
18. Bruno Senna (Williams)
19. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
20. Charles Pic (Marussia)
21. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham)
22. Timo Glock (Marussia)
23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT)
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)*

* Karthikeyan's time was not within the 107 percent limit; he was nearly three seconds shy of the best time in Q1 and may not be allowed to race tomorrow.

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – Saturday press conference

While McLaren were celebrating their 150th pole position, the surprise of the day came about thanks to Pastor Maldonado, who managed the best qualifying result of his F1 career.

Present were Lewis Hamilton (McLaren), Pastor Maldonado (Williams), and Fernando Alonso (Ferrari).

Lewis, McLaren's 150th Formula One pole position today. You really had to manage to the process though, particularly with the tyres. You were in the groove from the start, but what happened at the end when you stopped out on the track?

Lewis HAMILTON: Well, firstly it was a fantastic qualifying session for me. Really, I'm very happy with the way... I think it's one of the best ones I've ever had. Amazing job by the guys in the garage. Huge thanks to the guys in the factory for bringing us the upgrades, which have worked fantastically. I stopped on the track. I was told to stop. I don't really have any idea why. But the car was feeling great today. It's a great day for the team, I think. I don't know what happened with Jenson, but he's got great strength and pace throughout the race, so I have no doubt that he will make his way up through the grid.

Pastor, a sensational session for you and Williams. Where did you find the speed from?

Pastor MALDONADO: I think we've been working so hard from the beginning of the year trying to understand these tyres and to develop our car around the tyres and I think we actually did a really good step forward for this race. We need to continue to like that, keep pushing. I think at the moment there is a great atmosphere in the factory, a great atmosphere here in the team, the car looks pretty consistent and fantastic, especially in the race pace, so I'm looking forward to tomorrow. It's a great feeling to be here, it's my first time in the top three, so I'm really happy and hopefully we will continue like that and I would like to say thanks to the whole team.

Fernando, a lot of updates also on the Ferrari. Are you heading in the right direction now?

Fernando ALONSO: Yeah, I think so. Obviously for us it was impossible to even dream about being in the top three in the four races, we just had eyes on Q3 with no new set [of tyres] left or anything like that, so definitely it's a step forward. The grid is so compact now that if you improve two or three tenths it makes a huge difference in terms of positions: five or six positions. So we did a step forward. I still doubt how much we did, because I think maybe P3 is a little bit over-performing what we can do at the moment. But I'm extremely happy with the lap; it was perfect. I don't think there

is much more to come. I think I could put 100 more sets of tyres on and I could only repeat the lap time probably. It is the way it is. I'm extremely happy for today and hopefully we maximise or capitalise on this good starting position tomorrow with a good result.

Back to you Lewis. Obviously a lot of tyre tactics going on in qualifying today. What about the race tomorrow? What's your read on how things are going to shape up and what kind of shape do you feel you're in to become the fifth different race winner in five races?

LH: Well, we've looked after our prime tyres, which is generally the better tyre for the race, or so it seems at the moment – the longer lasting tyre. Also the option tyres are all in good condition so... I think it's going to be a massively tough race tomorrow. Of course, I've got these two great drivers next to me. I'm really happy to see this guy [Pastor Maldonado] up here and to see Williams up here and also Fernando. It's really great to see my old team-mate up here as well and I'm going to have a great battle with these guys and I really hope we're going to put on a great show for all the fans.

Lewis, congratulations. That was a great lap at the end. You must be so satisfied with it?

LH: I really am. I think every time you go out, every time you qualify you're searching for that perfect lap. You're searching to put the car in just the right sweet spot, where you're gaining all the time you could possibly gain and you're not losing anywhere and I really felt that throughout Q1, Q2 and Q3... after Q1 I was like 'damn, that should have been my Q3 lap' but I was really grateful that I was able to continue that throughout the session and yeah, fantastic feeling really – overwhelmed.

Lewis, you've started third on the grid here for the last three years and you haven't yet won this grand prix, you've been twice second. Do you really want to tick this box, win this grand prix, one of the ones you haven't yet won?

LH: Well I'm very much aware that I have an incredibly tough race tomorrow with these guys who are massively quick – also on their long runs – and just how tricky it is in general. But it would mean a huge amount for me to win here in Spain. It's always been a great place for me, it's beautiful weather all the time and the people are just incredible and the support that I've had continues to grow year by year. And it's become such a pleasure for me to come here. So, to win at one of the circuits where they have one of the biggest fan bases for Formula One in general, would be fantastic.

Can you explain why there should be such changing fortune, even between team-mates? For example, your team-mate didn't get through to Q3, his [Maldonado's] team-mate didn't get through into Q2 even and his [Alonso's] team-mate starts 17th. It seems extraordinary the changing fortunes even for team-mates.

LH: I think it's surprising all of us. We are all very surprised. Obviously we are very happy that we're up here! It just fantastic to see how close it is. You lose a tenth or two, that means you have to use your next set of tyres which then has a knock-on effect for the next session if you do or don't get through. And so it's massively competitive and it's great for... I'm sure the fans are loving it – maybe not enjoying Q3 so much, but we definitely did.

Pastor, where did it come from? How much did you get sorted out in Mugello? Do you think it's a knock-on effect after Mugello?

PM: I think all the guys in the factory did a wonderful job because the upgrades we have for this race, everything is working on the car. I was pretty happy yesterday in the free practice and the balance is there. Even though our strongest point has always been in the race, so I'm looking forward for tomorrow. Actually we improved – our worst thing was the qualifying pace so pretty happy for that, pretty happy for the team, for my country, for myself. It's a great job today.

Is this a favourite circuit, one of your best? I know Bruno [Senna] said it was one of his favourite circuits...

PM: I think all of us, we know very well this circuit, we enjoy this circuit because of the combination of corners we find here, even the teams know very well. I think we have been working so hard in the winter tests here and so we find a good balance in the car and a good compromise for quali and race.

Did you feel yesterday 'hey, we can really do something here'? Did you already feel that yesterday?

PM: Yes. I think yesterday we were thinking about top ten, it was possible. This morning I was quite surprised about our performance because the car was so quick with lower fuel. This morning it was possible.

Fernando, I don't think anyone was ever going to discount you here. I don't know what it was, maybe the crowd, or Ferrari etc, etc. How much satisfaction, third on the grid?

FA: Really happy. No doubt that this is a special weekend for me. And as I said on Thursday, there is always some extra motivation, some over-performing a little bit of what you have on hand, and yeah, thanks to the updates we had here, definitely we did a step forward, in the right direction because we hardly get into Q3 in the first four races and now we arrive with a little bit more comfortable way and then in Q3 the lap was good. I said before in the other conference with another hundred new tyres I would repeat the same time – I don't think there is any time left. But the points are given tomorrow, not today. We did as much as we could today and we are happy to start in a much better position that what we did in the previous grands prix. But we need the points tomorrow. Especially... the grid positions are mixed a little bit as you said, with some of the people that are in front of us in the championship, they start at the back tomorrow – so we need to take benefit of this good position today and score more points than them.

We remember in particular your start last year. Are we going to see a repeat of that?

FA: I'll tell you tomorrow. Definitely, a little bit like Pastor and Williams, our race pace is much better than qualifying pace – that is normally our weakest point and we suffer on Saturday some bad positions and then compromise a little bit our race pace. So tomorrow we have a privileged position to start, so the first corner will be important if we can gain some positions, but it's important also not to lose. The race tomorrow is very long with the tyre degradation and, as I said, we must score points tomorrow, good points, with this position we have. So, aggressive start yes, crazy start not.

Fernando, will you be happy tomorrow repeating this position or will you be looking for something more?

FA: You never know in Formula One. I think a podium position, we tend to agree in the team, if someone tells us two or three days ago, before coming to Barcelona, or after the Mugello test, that in Barcelona you will be on the podium, I think we all agree, we all be happy with that position. Today, obviously with this position, that dream or that target is closer. But I think the race is very long tomorrow and we saw even in Bahrain, Kimi started ninth, (11th), he was P10 or P11 in lap one and he nearly won the race in the end, so the positions are not crucial anymore as previous years. I think it will be an extremely tough race tomorrow to take care of the tyres again. Degradation, DRS, KERS to overtake. Pitstop strategy, we will see probably a lot of pitstops for everybody. The more pitstops you have, the more risk you have to have a problem in the pits. There are a lot of factors tomorrow that we need to take account. It will be a difficult race. A podium, I think, will be a good result for us and happy.

Lewis, are you happy? What are you feeling now? What do you think about tomorrow, this position?

LH: I really feel fantastic. I'm very, very happy. Normally you can always be happy with a pole position of course, but for some reason even more so this time than maybe any other qualifying that I've had, except for the first pole position I have had in Formula One. Just because, as I was just saying, you're always looking for that perfect lap, and I really, really felt that I got everything just, just sweet there and got absolutely everything out of my car. I didn't miss apexes or anything like that. It's an incredibly feeling when you have that. It's really just a very unique experience. But tomorrow's going to be a tough race. As you were just saying, Fernando had a great start here last year and it's such a long drive down to turn one – but he was also saying people are coming to win from quite far back, or to compete for wins from quite far back, so tomorrow's just going to be about looking after your tyres, getting the right pitstops at the right times and really being patient, I think, at the most important times during the race.

To all three drivers: they have chosen new rules and tyres to have an unpredictable Formula One. Do you think this championship is just unpredictable, or technically less logical as well?

FA: I don't think they choose the tyres for the championship to be unpredictable. We have the tyres that we have.

LH: I'm not sure that they were expecting it to be as it is, but I definitely think that it is a bit unpredictable at the moment, massively close. There have been several different winners in the races and you can make such a big difference, if you don't finish one race but then you win the next race, it can still keep you in contention so it feels for me – out of all the championships that I've been in – it feels to me to be one of the most exciting ones.

Regardless if I haven't won yet, it just feels like one of the best, I imagine, for people to watch.

PM: I think that the tyres are the same for everybody so all the teams and all the drivers are working hard to adapt ourselves, even the cars to these tyres and to get the best performance we can.

Pastor when you reached Williams, there were a lot of people, among journalists too, who expressed doubts about you and they said that you have got the seat because of your rich sponsors and so on. Now, are you convinced that you have proved that you are one of the top drivers, thanks to your qualities?

PM: I'm think that I'm lucky, I'm lucky to have not only a sponsor behind me but also a country behind me, pushing me so hard. Here I am, doing my job, doing my best, trying to improve every time. I have a mission, which is to be back with Williams to the top, so here we are. We still need to keep pushing, to keep improving and I think that is possible.

Pastor, congratulations, I want to know about the start tomorrow. What do you think? Is it going to be easier to attack Lewis at the first corner, or defend from Fernando?

PM: I think it's going to be a very tough race, because not only us three but even the other drivers have a very close pace. Our strongest point was always race pace so hopefully our car will be very consistent and pretty good in the race. I hope to continue like that, I hope to stay in the position, the podium is very important for us, the points, so it's very important to keep calm and to do good race.

Lewis, we have such a close championship in terms of times in qualifying, but I think your gap was over half a second to Pastor. Does it surprise you? It looks like a dominant car.

LH: Yes, I'm definitely surprised to have such a big gap. I wasn't surprised that it was a good lap because it felt that I switched the tyres on the right way and I feel that I extracted everything but yeah, considering that all the sessions are so close, all the teams are so close, I definitely wasn't expecting to have such a big gap. That's quite a big gap for us but we definitely can't take it for granted. I think we'll go to other races and it will be slower and in some races we will be faster but we really, really hope that with the continuous upgrades that we get we can try to maintain the pace that we have, especially through qualifying but most importantly to try and improve through the race.

Fernando and Lewis: I think we all agree that it's a good thing when Williams is doing well in Formula One and both of you have had moments this year when you've been racing with Pastor or the other Williams driver. I wonder if either of you or both of you could tell me where the car has strong points that you've noticed while racing with it on the circuit.

LH: I can't remember exactly what your strong points are but for me it's fantastic to see Williams up here, really, really very happy for them. I know Sir Frank quite well since I've been here and I'm a huge admirer of him and his team and to see them up here again, I think Formula One's just not been the same without Williams being at the front, competing. So it's good, it's great for them and for the whole team. I've always thought they had quite a good car, it always looked quite beautiful but I think this year it's performing as well as looking good, so we'll definitely be on our toes to try and make sure we're ahead of them.

FA: Yeah, I don't know. Obviously I fight a little bit more with them than Lewis probably in these four races. The car looks strong in race pace as Pastor said and basically taking care of the tyres. I remember in China they did like 32 laps with the same set of tyres that no one could adapt to. Apart from the car, they are doing a very good job, setting up the car with the engineers – I know some of them, very talented and a fantastic job from the drivers as well. Pastor has this year proved, not only today, but many times this year that he's doing a fantastic job, also with Bruno but less lucky sometimes. In Australia, on the last lap, Pastor crashed behind me but I was already fighting in the top five so it's not new that he's fighting in these top positions so well done to all of them.

Fernando, after the last free practice this morning, did you imagine that after qualifying could be fighting for pole? When did you feel the real change in the car?

FA: No, obviously this morning's practice we didn't think we could be in the top five or top six. I think P8 to P12 was more or less our position after practice, same as after yesterday's practice as well, that we were fastest in the morning and P14 in the afternoon, so we were something in between those positions in practice as well. Yeah, I'm happy and a little bit surprised to be in front of one McLaren, both Red Bulls, both Lotuses, so definitely this is not what we were expecting but qualifying went like this, it went our way this time and as I said, today means nothing if we don't finish the job tomorrow.

Fernando, are you worried that you might not be able to finish the race in the same position you are in now, or are you worried the rhythm of the Renault – because they were very strong on Friday – and maybe some of the guys behind. I ask about Kimi because I think he could be a contender for the race.

FA: Yeah, yeah, definitely, the Lotus will be a threat tomorrow, starting fourth and fifth. They've been quick all weekend so tomorrow no surprises if they are fighting for the podium or even for a race win. Sebastian is P8 so he will be fighting for a top position later in the race. With Jenson and Mark having the possibility to choose which tyres to start on, I'm sure that they will prepare something good to recover position because they have the pace. They had the pace yesterday in FP2 and I'm sure that tomorrow they will be quick. The race will be tough to maintain positions because we believe that there are quicker cars behind us but let's see what we can do. On the other hand, this is not an easy track to overtake on,

The forecast for tomorrow is significantly cooler, can that change the picture that some cars which hadn't been up to speed today might fall into the operating window of the tyres tomorrow?

LH: I think it could be the opposite. If people are struggling today to switch their tyres on then potentially they would struggle even more if it was cooler but that is a real tricky situation to be in, that sometimes three tyres come in and one, your left front doesn't work and then you just have understeer and you don't get the time. If it is the case and it's cooler tomorrow it will be tough for everyone, even the guys who did switch their tyres on today.

FA: Maybe rain.

To all drivers: you approach the times that you registered in winter testing today, with the same tyres but 20 degrees hotter asphalt. Can you make an analysis about this?

LH: Did we do these times in the winter?

FA: Yes, 21.6s for Grosjean in winter I think. We did 22.2s, we did 22.5s today, something like that. I think the cars improved a lot between February and now but the temperature... we know that the hotter it is the slower you are. It happens in the winter as well. If you do your best time at 9 'o clock in the morning, then you cannot repeat those times in the afternoon. In a way that shows how much the cars improved for everybody from February to here. It's good.

PM: I agree. I think today was a bit more windy, which is a penalty for everybody.

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – Race report

Pastor Maldonado delivered a surprise win for the Williams team at the Circuit de Catalunya this afternoon, ending an eight-year victory drought for the British racers.

Maldonado's much longed for win was a historic event: the 27-year-old becomes the first Venezuelan race winner in Formula One history.

When the Williams driver inherited pole position after McLaren driver Lewis Hamilton was excluded from the results of Saturday's qualifying session few expected the Venezuelan to hold the lead until the chequered flag. And while it was by no means a lights-to-flag win for Maldonado, he ably held off a fighting Fernando Alonso to cross the line in the lead.

The Spanish Grand Prix traditionally offers very little in the way of action. The Circuit de Catalunya's status as a test track dulls its thrill as a grand prix venue, with the reams of available telemetry making the racing largely predictable.

That was the accepted doctrine until the 2012 Spanish Grand Prix tore up the rulebook, thanks in no small part to Pirelli's inspired decision to bring the hard and soft compounds along for the weekend.

With such a large gap between the two types of rubber tyre strategy was king, and much could be gained from taking strategic risks.

A case in point was Hamilton, who started at the back of the grid and used a two-stop tyre strategy to fight his way to a P8 finish. At one point, the British racer was running as high as P4.

After his second stop, Hamilton – who is often criticised for failing to manage his tyres – was able to nurse a set of primes for the last thirty laps of the race, conceding only a single place at the end of the race as a result of his decaying rubber.

While Hamilton benefited from tyre strategy, it was the pit stops that helped Maldonado secure his historic win.

The Williams driver got a comparatively slow start off the line and conceded the lead of the race to the Ferrari of Alonso in very short order. But the Venezuelan hung on the back end of the F2012 until the second round of pit stops, when the Williams boxed a lap ahead of the man in front.

Maldonado came out in position to stay ahead of Alonso after the Ferrari driver's second stop. What followed was a masterclass in confident tyre preservation while being chased by one of the current grid's great drivers. Maldonado showed no signs of the nervousness that has dogged him in previous races, and he was able to maintain a constant gap to the Ferrari before pulling away in the closing stages of the grand prix.

Behind the leading pair was the chasing Lotus of Kimi Raikkonen, further back than anyone would have predicted but still – mathematically – in the fight. By the dying laps of this afternoon's race the Finnish driver was closing on the men ahead by an average of two seconds per lap, but there was too much gap and too little race for the Iceman to finish the job.

Of particular note behind the leading pack was Sauber's Kamui Kobayashi, whose stellar drive to fifth involved a number of the ballsy passes with which he made his name when sitting in for Timo Glock at Toyota at the end of the 2009 season. On lap 61, in his final manoeuvre, the Japanese driver nearly caused sparks when he passed the Mercedes of Nico Rosberg for P5.

Both Sebastian Vettel and Felipe Massa were issued with drive-through penalties for ignoring yellow flags nearly half-way through the race. The Red Bull driver recovered from his penalty with an impressive climb through the field to an eventual P7 finish, while the Brazilian found himself adrift yet again, running lapped in P15, stuck between a Force India and a Caterham.

The biggest incident of the race was an early collision between Michael Schumacher and Bruno Senna, with the Mercedes driver crashing into the back of the slowing Williams, which was itself trying to get out of the way. For his error in judgement the stewards issued Schumacher with a five-place grid penalty for the Monaco Grand Prix.

Maldonado's win makes it five different winners from five teams at the first five races of the season for the first time since 1983. If we have a sixth

new winner at the Monaco Grand Prix, 2012 will enter the Formula One record books.

Spanish Grand Prix results (unofficial)

1. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1h39m09.145
2. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) + 3.195s
3. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) + 3.884s
4. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) + 14.799s
5. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) + 1:14.641s
6. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) + 1:17.576s
7. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) + 1:27.919s
8. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) + 1:28.100s
9. Jenson Button (McLaren) + 1:25.200s
10. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) + 1 lap
11. Mark Webber (Red Bull) + 1 lap
12. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) + 1 lap
13. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) + 1 lap
14. Paul di Resta (Force India) + 1 lap
15. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) + 1 lap
16. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) + 1 lap
17. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) + 1 lap
18. Timo Glock (Marussia) + 2 laps
19. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) + 3 laps

Sergio Perez (Sauber) RET
Charles Pic (Marussia) RET
Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) RET
Bruno Senna (Williams) RET
Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) RET

F1 Spanish Grand Prix – Sunday press conference

Five races, five winners, and a podium that few would have predicted at the start of the Spanish Grand Prix weekend. The 2012 Formula One season just keeps getting better.

The Sunday press conference in Barcelona saw Pastor Maldonado join the media in his first post-race victory session.

Present were Pastor Maldonado (Williams), Fernando Alonso (Ferrari), and Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus).

Pastor, your first victory, brilliantly judged – describe your emotions?

Pastor MALDONADO: I think it's a wonderful day, not just for me but for all the team. We have been pushing so hard since last year to try to improve race by race and here we are. Yesterday we were here after a great qualifying and today we did it again. It was a tough race because the strategy as well, it was tough especially because of the rear tyres – after a couple of laps we were struggling with [them]. I need to say I'm pretty happy because the car was so competitive since the first lap. Fernando did a better start than me but I was just following the pace and it was so great. It's my first podium and my first victory and you can imagine what I feel.

Fernando, second today and obviously a lot of progress for you and the team. And once again a blinding start.

Fernando ALONSO: Yeah, it was a fantastic start again. The team prepared quite nice again the clutch and everything – the procedure to do a good start. It was close on the straight until Turn One with Pastor, and then we had the better side, the inside. We took the momentum there and we led the race for the first part but then William's anticipated the stop and get in front and at the end it was close. We had a newer tyre than Pastor and we tried a couple of times but it was not possible out of the last corner. Then in the very last laps I felt the car was strange, we lost a lot of grip. Maybe we lost some aerodynamic part or something because we were very slow... (inaudible)... we were lucky at the end. Second place at home feels fantastic and thanks to the people that came here and the people at home and hopefully a step forward in terms of championship possibilities.

Kimi, third today. You were a lot of people's favourite going into this grand prix. Do you think you and the team made all the right choices this afternoon?

Kimi RAIKKONEN: We have to look. I'm a bit disappointed. I expected us to be a bit stronger in the race, especially at the beginning. At the end we were very good, but it was too late. We were not fast enough and quick enough to race and that's why we couldn't fight for a win. But we showed in the end that we have to speed but we just have to look at what we did. Maybe we took the wrong choice in the first pit stop. In the end, like I said we were not fast enough in the beginning and that cost us the race, so I was not so disappointed during the race because I saw that I couldn't follow them at the beginning. But at the end when you catch them up almost 20 seconds then you get a bit of a disappointed feeling afterwards, when you just needed a few laps to be even able to fight for the first place. That's racing and at least I scored some good points and we're going in the right direction.

Back to you Pastor and this is the first Williams win since 2004. They managed to get you to jump Fernando at the second round of pit stops but he gave you some real pressure at the end didn't he?

PM: Yeah, it was so close. We were looking to manage the tyre degradation so I wasn't pushing that hard, just to keep the tyres alive for the end of the race and Fernando got too close. There were some moments that he was so close, especially at the end of the straight. But I was managing the gap and controlling everything. I think our pace today was pretty strong and the car looks fantastic. Even the team. We did a small mistake at the last pit stop but it doesn't affect our performance.

Fernando, describe your feelings at the second stop when Pastor jumped you because you were caught up behind a backmarker in that critical lap weren't you?

FA: Yeah, we were a little bit unlucky maybe. We had a Marussia but I think he got a penalty at the end. Obviously, it's not a solution now but hopefully people start to understand that they need to respect the rules and today again they didn't and they paid the penalty. It's more of a penalty the penalty we paid – maybe the race win – but yeah a little bit disappointed. But they [Williams] did a great job and they had the pace, because in the last stint, if we were faster than the Williams we had the opportunity to overtake but they were quicker than us so they deserve the victory.

Kimi, it's the second podium for you in a row. Do you feel a win is around the corner?

KR: Yeah, twice already. Unfortunately you're not always going to get there. If you get the chance, you should take it because it's not every race that you will be able to fight for that position or even try it. Hopefully we can keep doing what we're doing now and at a certain point I'm sure that things will go exactly right and we can. But so far it's been a good step and the car has been strong everywhere. The next race is a bit different – Monaco – it's hard to say how it goes there. The team has done a good job and we have still work to do, things to improve. But so far it's going in a good way and I'm happy with it. OK, we're not 100% happy with it because we are not winning but that's a very normal thing and I'm happy for the team.

As Kimi says, we go to Monaco next Pastor. That's one of your favourite tracks. What chance a back-to-back victory for you?

PM: I think it's going to be a great opportunity for us to be strong again. For sure I will be doing my best on the driving. The team is looking after the car so we need to continue like that. Keep pushing with the car, to develop it as soon as possible and consistency will be the important thing in this championship.

When did you think you could win, because obviously there have been changing emotions, obviously you were second on the grid and then first on the grid and then obviously the start etc., When did you think this was possible?

PM: After the qualifying. Y'know, it was so great to start from the head, from the front and for sure the team did a great job to give me a car and I did my job on the qualifying. And then starting from the pole it's much easier, everything.

And then obviously overtaken at the start...

PM: Yes, our start wasn't that great, Fernando had one better than us but after the first lap the pace was very competitive, the car looks very good and we were looking at the strategy, that's it.

And what about the tyres at the end? Because obviously Fernando closed on you and then dropped back.

PM: When Fernando got close I was looking after the tyres, I didn't push that much, just because the big tyre degradation. We did an extremely good strategy today, everything under control, even some moments when Fernando got too close but we had a little bit better traction than him, using KERS and everything. So it was managing the race, looking for the gaps and the pace.

You must have thought that with KERS, him within a second, at any moment it was going to happen – but it never did.

PM: For sure it was difficult from this morning because the gaps are so close between the top teams at the moment. When I saw that I was second in the first corner, 'OK', I said, 'the race is going to be long. We need to keep pushing, we need to prepare to change our strategy just to attack Ferrari and we did it. Everything was perfect, except the last pitstop. We had a big moment there but it doesn't affect our final result.

Fernando, you got so close, right up there, and then it just went away I guess, and then by the end it looked as though you really were struggling on the tyres.

FA: Yeah, it was close with ten laps to go, ten laps to the end. We were attacking Pastor when we were closing to within one second but then the last seven or eight laps we lost the grip, around Turn Seven I felt. I informed the team some corners after, in Turn Nine, to check if everything is OK because maybe we lost some aerodynamic part of the front wing or under the floor or something because we had no more grip at all. So, from that point the last seven laps, it was monitoring the distance and the gap with Kimi. We knew it was a very long last seven laps. At the end it was close. I think one lap more and Kimi overtake us. So we were lucky at the end and happy – happy with the weekend in general, not only with the race, because we had a very strong weekend, on Fridays with good practice, the car felt more or less competitive yesterday. I think we extract everything from the car again, maximise the potential of what we have in our hands and today the start was great, the race pace was good, at one point we were lapping one Red Bull in front of us with the blue flags, so... it's very strange. We were 57 seconds behind Vettel in Bahrain, and we were lapping Webber here. No one understands probably. Not us either.

It really was that sudden when you lost the grip? It was almost like a switch.

FA: Yeah, yeah, it was in turn seven, over the kerb maybe, something fall out of the car or something, we need to check. But it was difficult. As Pastor said, in the last corner, turn 16, it's difficult to follow anyone after the chicane, so we knew that when you lose the position at the pitstop, you have to have a big pace advantage if you want to overtake someone. With the difference and with the pace that Williams had today, we knew it was difficult.

I suppose everybody in Italy wants to know, has Ferrari turned the corner? Are you now back in front again?

FA: We'll see. I think when we are first and second in one qualifying and first and second in one race, we have to say that we have the best car. Until that moment we are fighting. I think this year is very difficult to have a pace advantage or to be happy with the car you have in your hands, because everything is so close. Consistency and continuous development will be important in this championship because two-tenths can be six or seven positions in one qualifying this year. But what we can say is we have probably the most difficult start of the championship in these three years in Ferrari, with a car that was not competitive at all, and we finish the first quarter of the championship, so this is the fifth race out of 20, and we are leading the championship, or the same points as Vettel, so we have to be very, very proud and very happy with the points we achieved and with the position. Maybe we have not to be so proud about how competitive we are but we are working on that.

Kimi, tell us about the start, because that pretty much established your race.

KR: Yeah, I had a pretty good start, nothing to complain about. I thought I would get the chance to overtake outside both of the first two but I didn't have enough speed in a straight line – I actually hit the limiter I think in fifth gear which kind of stopped my acceleration a bit but after that I didn't have the speed to hang on and hound them. I was pulling away from the guys behind me but I couldn't stay. The first stint was pretty OK but the second, I chose the soft tyre and I didn't have the speed to keep up with them. I'm a bit disappointed but I just tried to fight and then we changed the tyres and it seemed to turn out to be pretty good but we were just too far away. We need, like, ten more laps and then I think we could have been fighting for the win.

Absolute charge at the end, your tyres were OK?

KR: Yes, it was OK. I had two new sets of Prime but unfortunately I didn't have more sets of Prime anyhow to put in the first pitstop. The car was very good but just a bit too late for me. We fall off too much in the last stint to be able to fight for the win. But one more lap we could probably could have got Fernando – but it's easy to say after.

And what did you tell the Finnish viewers just now?

KR: It's Mothers' Day in Finland.

So Happy Mothers' Day?

KR: Yeah. I had nothing else to say to Finnish viewers.

Kimi, second place in Bahrain, third place in Spain; is this the maximum for you or can you win?

KR: The fact is the reason why I'm disappointed is because in the end if we have done everything right, we could have put ourselves into first place. The car has been fast enough but we've been doing small things not correctly and I've done some mistakes on my side but if everything was 100 percent OK we could have won. There's no issue with the speed of the car, but it's so close between all the teams and drivers that if you have a small problem or a small issue during the weekend then it's going to cost you a lot. If you're three tenths behind then you're suddenly not in the last qualifying. As you give yourself the chance to be fighting at the front, I think our car can do it but everything has to fall in the right place to be able to win.

Pastor, you are now a national hero. Are you ready?

PM: For sure everyone is so happy in my country. I'm very lucky to have a country behind me, pushing so hard, to see me here in Formula One and especially to be here, between these guys. I'm pretty happy for Venezuela, I'm happy for Williams as well. They did a wonderful job to give me a great car for this race. We are getting better and better, race after race.

Fernando, after the first five races, and all the problems you're supposed to have in your team, no one has scored more points than you have now. How much more confident are you today than you were on Thursday, or on the inside were you expecting this?

FA: No, I am a definitely surprised by the quantity of the points that we have; I'm a bit surprised by today's result, or the weekend's results. We were confident of improving the car, we were hoping for some signs of improvement here in Barcelona. As I said, in Bahrain, we were nearly out of Q3 and then in the race, P9, one minute behind the leaders, so we arrived in Barcelona with some hope, some optimism about the upgrades but I think the result, the overall weekend pace has been a little bit better than expected, because we were quick in qualifying and quick in the race but this, in my opinion or how I feel after the weekend, I still don't know where we are. I think we need to wait for more races, for the championship to stabilise a little bit because I think we maybe over-performed a little bit compared with the potential we have and maybe some other teams under-performed or they had some problems to get their tyres working or something, because, as I said, some of the results that we saw this weekend feel very strange.

Fernando, if we take a look at the race, maybe it was a bad decision to stop so late after Pastor after you'd had the problem with the Marussia because it's so important in Formula One to stay in front from the aerodynamic point of view.

FA: Yeah, obviously you never know. After the race it's always easier to review the strategy. The choice was always to stop on the same lap or one lap later than Pastor, always try to cover the position. When Williams decided to stop in the second pit stop, we had one Marussia in front of us for a lap and a half. When we saw that in the second sector, we were already exiting behind Pastor so at that point, we decided to keep going for a few more laps and try to get the opportunity at the end of the race, with a shorter stint. I think we didn't lose the win because of the Marussia because if you had the pace in the last stint, you had to overtake Pastor and we didn't because they were faster than us, but for sure, we went out of the plan because of the backmarker.

Pastor, could you explain the start of the race, because you had a good fight with Fernando, and I want to know if you've received congratulations from your president in Venezuela?

PM: You know it wasn't the best start ever from us. I think the clutch slipped quite a lot. Fernando had a better jump than us. It was so close, I tried to defend the position but he was already on the better part of the track, so I decided to back off and follow him. At that moment, I thought that the race was long and we changed our strategy, to attack Ferrari. I think from the second stop we did pretty good and I think we surprised them because we did it so early. And the call? No, not yet because I was on the podium before, so no time to even see my family, my people. Maybe he will call. I don't know.

Fernando and Kimi, did you believe that Pastor could be your main rival today, and if not, how big a surprise is it?

FA: Yeah, I think so. We saw in general that during the weekend that Williams was good. Lewis was maybe the favourite for this race after the pace we saw from Ferrari on Friday and the pole position by half a second yesterday. With Lewis's penalty, Pastor was the strongest at the front so no surprises.

KR: Williams have been quite fast for two races in certain points and I think, as we've said before, it's very difficult to say who is really the quickest overall because at one race one team is there and then suddenly they are tenth in the next race, so it's bit of an odd situation where we are this year, but it gives a lot of chances for all the teams who have the speed and when the tyres are working for them they are much better than the others. The tyres seem to be the key thing. If you get them working well you seem to be fast. Sometimes you just drop out of the window a little bit and you have a hard time.

Pastor you are the fifth winner in five races, so the top of the field seems to be very close. Do you put Williams and yourself among the possible winners of the championship?

PM: For sure we are a little bit backwards compared with the leaders, with Fernando and Vettel, but we need to keep working. We are not the best team at the moment. The car looked pretty good today, but I think we need to keep pushing some particulars at Williams, especially in the car, but everything is possible. The gaps are so close at the moment, I'm driving well, I have a good feeling with the team, with the car, so everything is possible. For sure we are looking to do our best, looking forward to winning some races, to getting a couple more podiums and I'm really happy because the team hasn't won many races for many years so this is a great moment for us. I hope to continue like that.

Pastor, you were in the same team last season. When you finished the season you were in front of only three teams: Marussia, Hispania and Caterham, and now you are in front of all of them; what has happened to explain such a change in performance

from one season to another?

PM: We made big changes in the factory, we have new staff in some of the departments and completely changed the approach to building the car. I need to say that this year's car has great performance, great potential to become even stronger than it is and for sure, this is great for motivation, to motivate the team, the factory, to keep pushing like that. I think this is the way. We are motivated and we need to keep pushing.

Pastor, it looks like this could be a very long Sunday in Venezuela. Do you have any information as to what's going on now or can you imagine what might happen there?

PM: I can imagine that there will be a party everywhere but I don't know at the moment. I need to see some of the fans, my family there. I think everybody who saw the race and for sure all the people are happy at the moment and this is great for Venezuela after nearly thirty years without any driver in Formula One, so I think it's a great moment for our country.

Fernando, you have already said that at the moment everything is possible and not many things are explainable which is very strange for Formula One. I don't think we ever had this situation before. Do you, as a driver, enjoy this uncertainty or would you like to have some more answers on open questions?

FA: I don't know. I don't know how to answer. We probably like the unknown situation that we have now, so you arrive in Monaco next Wednesday and you don't know if you will be a winner or if you will be out of the points. That's what we feel at the moment, not only for us. But in a way, after eleven years in Formula One and seeing Ferrari dominate most of them, now that I'm at Ferrari, I would like to have more stability and a dominant car.
