

This is another race that I covered from home (or from my day job, listening to the BBC coverage through iPlayer while looking as busy as I could). As a result, coverage is patchy till the weekend.

## F1 Sofa Blog: F1 at Istanbul Park

I couldn't make it to Turkey, I'm afraid. Not enough annual leave to pull it off. But my view from the sofa's not too bad, so life will go on.

As with all practice sessions, times set should be viewed with the disclaimer that a practice session is just that. With teams running different programmes, testing new components, and generally getting a feel for the track, you can't make any comparisons worthy of the name.

That said, there were not many surprises on the timesheets this morning. The top eight contained both McLarens, both Mercedes, both Red Bulls, and both Renaults. Ferrari's absence was a bit of a surprise, given that Felipe Massa has dominated Istanbul Park in the past, but the team's programme this morning may have made a top eight finish impossible. I'm not yet sure what else they were trialling, but Fernando Alonso was running an F-duct, while Massa wasn't.

For much of this morning's session, the track was empty. Istanbul Park is particularly hard on tyres, and this year the drivers complained that it was far dirtier and dustier than it has been in the past. No one wanted to waste their good runs on the hard compound laying down rubber for their opponents, so for 45 minutes it was installation lap after installation lap, teasing us with the prospect of action soon to come.

Once the drivers began to flood the track approximately half-way through the session, times were changing so often that there was no point keeping track. Most of the big guns were trading places at the top of the board, until Lewis Hamilton and Jenson Button locked out 1-2 for McLaren with fast laps on tyres in peak condition. Hamilton and Button traded places at the top of the board, but when Lewis posted a 1:28.653, 0.9s faster than his teammate, no one was able to best him.

Hamilton spent the morning testing a revised front wing for the team, and the new part appears to have done the trick. Provided the young Brit is able to manage his tyres for the duration of Sunday's 58 laps, we could see a good showing here from the former champion. The MP4-25 was always expected to perform well at Istanbul Park, as the track configuration suits the car's design. Before heading to Istanbul this week, Hamilton said he thought the McLarens would be in their element in Turkey.

Red Bull are testing their version of the F-duct this weekend, although only Sebastian Vettel was running it this morning. Vettel and teammate Webber finished fifth and eighth in this morning's standings, separated by two-tenths of a second, so on first appearances, the F-duct doesn't appear to have hampered the RB6's performance, but it hasn't led to the Red Bulls lapping the field at Mach 1. Yet.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of the morning was Heikki Kovalainen. The Lotus driver finished this morning's session 3.5 seconds slower than pace-setter Lewis Hamilton, but was only 0.5s slower than the Toro Rosso of Jaime Alguersuari, and seven-tenths behind Rubens Barrichello in a Williams. This is brilliant progress for the Norfolk-based team, who began the season nearly three seconds behind the slowest of the established outfits.

With steady progress and a professional attitude, Lotus are going from strength to strength, becoming more competitive with every race weekend. They are a model new team in that regard, and should be challenging for points in 2011.

The biggest event of the morning was Adrian Sutil's Turn 8 accident with only minutes to go before the chequered flag. The Force India driver planted his car into the wall, but walked away from the accident unharmed. The team explained on Twitter: "He said he had understeer and went off into the marbles, which then put him into the barriers." Sutil smashed the front wing and damaged the right front wheel, which could be seen peeking out from the bodywork at a jaunty angle not suited to forward motion. Passing the accident, Hamilton went on his radio to say "I'm surprised it's not been red-flagged: it's a big crash".

### F1 Times (unofficial)

1. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1:28.653 20 laps
2. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1:29.615 + 0.962 20 laps
3. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1:29.750 + 1.097 24 laps
4. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1:29.855 + 1.202 24 laps
5. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1:29.867 + 1.214 30 laps
6. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1:30.061 + 1.408 23 laps
7. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1:30.065 + 1.412 24 laps
8. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1:30.097 + 1.444 26 laps
9. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1:30.294 + 1.641 20 laps
10. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1:30.501 + 1.848 17 laps
11. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1:30.615 + 1.962 20 laps

12. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1:30.853 + 2.200 21 laps
  13. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1:30.867 + 2.214 21 laps
  14. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1:31.011 + 2.358 23 laps
  15. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1:31.238 + 2.585 17 laps
  16. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1:31.355 + 2.702 23 laps
  17. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1:31.464 + 2.811 19 laps
  18. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1:31.735 + 3.082 27 laps
  19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1:32.161 + 3.508 24 laps
  20. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1:32.990 + 4.337 22 laps
  21. Karun Chandhok (HRT) 1:34.876 + 6.223 13 laps
  22. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1:35.137 + 6.484 21 laps
  23. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1:35.583 + 6.930 15 laps
  24. Sakon Yamamoto (HRT) 1:36.137 + 7.484 26 laps
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## F1 Sofa Blog: FP2 at Istanbul Park

Felipe Massa is having a pretty bad weekend. The three-time winner of the Turkish Grand Prix finished 13th in this morning's practice session, and was unable to improve on P10 in the afternoon, following a spin on Turn 8 that ruined his option tyres before he was able to set a fast lap.

Massa was not the only driver to struggle with Turn 8 this afternoon – Karun Chandhok, Kamui Kobayashi, Tonio Liuzzi, and Vitaly Petrov all came off at one point. Even pace setter Jenson Button had a wobble there, but it didn't affect his fastest time of 1:28.280s.

In one hour of free practice this afternoon, Massa had three spins at Turn 8. This is highly unusual in a man who has won the Turkish Grand Prix three times in a row. Is he having difficulties with the car, or is it the pressure of this race weekend?

The world is watching Massa's form at his favourite circuit, keen to see whether the Brazilian will be able to keep ahead of teammate Alonso. While Ferrari have said they are not seeking to replace Massa, a new contract has yet to be signed, and he will want to be on top of his game until ink is on paper.

The morning's form is probably a reflection of Ferrari's Friday testing programme. While Massa finished behind Alonso in both sessions, the Spaniard only managed a P9 in the morning, 1.6s off the pace. In the afternoon, Alonso was P5, 0.4s slower than Jenson Button. Massa's fastest lap, set on old prime tyres following his Turn 8 slide, was a 1:29.620, 0.9s slower than his teammate.

Michael Schumacher is beginning to look more like the aggressive driver we remember from years gone by. And by aggressive I mean his approach to corners. While the Mercedes' understeer means a certain amount of aggression is needed, Schumacher spent FP2 attacking corners with delight. It was a massive contrast to his performance in Shanghai, and a sign that yet more of the rust has flaked off the seven-time world champion.

Not so much rust that teammate Nico Rosberg didn't manage to outscore the legend this afternoon, however. Having spent the first half of FP2 doing aero runs without setting a time, Rosberg's fastest lap was a 1:28.914s, a full 0.06s faster than Schumacher. For the moment, the two Mercedes drivers appear to be very evenly matched, and it is likely they will trade position in practice and qualifying for a few more races to come, until one of them finds the definite performance advantage.

Robert Kubica looked initially quick in both of today's sessions, but finished in P8 this afternoon, two spots below his morning run. The real surprise from Renault came in the form of Vitaly Petrov, who put his GP2 experience at Istanbul to good use, lapping at 1:29.501s this afternoon, good enough for P9. In F1 the Russian was P7 with a 1:30.065s.

Do not expect a Monaco-style performance from Kubica this weekend – the Pole has said he doesn't think he can get the car around Istanbul with the panache displayed in Monte Carlo two weeks ago.

The assumption has been that Red Bull will continue to dominate the 2010 season, and that Turkey would bring much of the same from Sebastian Vettel and Mark Webber, but that assumption is being tested this weekend.

Vettel spent the early part of the afternoon ensconced in the pits while a water pipe was changed on his car, prompting press room fears of cooling problems in the Turkish heat, and a possible repeat of Bahrain's spark plug failure. The young German got out on the track, set a 1:28.590s worthy of a brief P1, and finished the afternoon in P3. His teammate, despite finishing the session in P2, wasn't quite so lucky.

With only seconds to go before the chequered flag, Webber's car stopped around T2. There was a brief puff of smoke and what sounded like engine failure before the Australian reversed the RB6 down an exit road and in to safety. At the same time, Vettel was on the radio to the team, worried about his water pressure.

Depending on the nature of the problem with Webber's car, the championship leader could face a penalty this weekend.

FP2 Times (unofficial):

1. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1:28.280 30 Laps
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1:28.378 + 0.098 24 Laps
3. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1:28.590 + 0.310 26 Laps
4. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1:28.672 + 0.392 32 Laps
5. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1:28.725 + 0.445 30 Laps
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1:28.914 + 0.634 22 Laps

7. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1:28.974 + 0.694 22 Laps
  8. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1:29.225 + 0.945 34 Laps
  9. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1:29.501 + 1.221 36 Laps
  10. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1:29.620 + 1.340 26 Laps
  11. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1:29.629 + 1.349 16 Laps
  12. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1:29.987 + 1.707 17 Laps
  13. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1:30.053 + 1.773 34 Laps
  14. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1:30.176 + 1.896 34 Laps
  15. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1:30.386 + 2.106 32 Laps
  16. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1:30.627 + 2.347 28 Laps
  17. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1:30.766 + 2.486 32 Laps
  18. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1:30.933 + 2.653 37 Laps
  19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1:31.610 + 3.330 37 Laps
  20. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1:33.013 + 4.733 28 Laps
  21. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1:33.081 + 4.801 11 Laps
  22. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1:33.312 + 5.032 29 Laps
  23. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1:33.420 + 5.140 35 Laps
  24. Karun Chandhok (HRT) 1:33.740 + 5.460 25 Laps
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## F1 Sofa Blog: FP3 at Istanbul Park

It's hardly worth getting out of bed for the first half of a morning practice session. Nothing happens on track except a few installation laps while everyone plays the 'I'll wait till someone else has rubbered in the track' game.

And then when they do decide it's time to hit the track, the veritable rush from the pits leads to traffic.

FP3 at Istanbul Park was a bit more interesting in the first few minutes, but only because of a host of mechanical problems. First to fall was Hekki Kovalainen's Lotus, which suffered a sensor failure leading to the Finnish driver getting stuck in third gear as he crawled back to the pits.

The next crawler was Adrian Sutil, who coasted around the track on no power following what Force India called a small hydraulic problem. The team were unable to fix his car before the session ended, so the German driver was unable to set a time this morning.

Mark Webber was the third man of the morning to suffer mechanical problems with his car. Instead of accelerating out of the pits, the Australian driver coasted around the lap, raising concerns that the Red Bull reliability gremlins were back in full force. According to the team there was no throttle response, an infuriating but relatively simple mechanical failure.

Thanks to slow-moving vehicles and a number of wild spins at Turn 8, FP3 was peppered with yellow flags, although there were no serious incidents to report.

Lewis Hamilton had one of the most dramatic moments of the morning, with a big spin at Turn 8 that looked like it would put an end to his practice session when the car appeared stuck in the gravel. The young Brit ran wide at the third apex, hit the grass, and span across the run-off area until he was embedded in the gravel.

He was eventually able to get the MP4-25 moving back to the pits, but all four tyres looked absolutely trashed as he nursed the car home. Back in the garage, the damage looked extensive – in addition to punctures and flat spots on the rubber, there was damage to his floor and double diffuser.

The McLaren mechanics had the former champion back on track fairly quickly, and Hamilton repaid their efforts with a flying lap that saw him in P1 on his first post-spin outing. His time at the top of the leaderboard was not long-lived – as the session began to draw to a close, times changed faster than the weather on the west coast of Scotland.

When the chequered flag fell, Sebastian Vettel was on top of the standings, with Nico Rosberg two-tenths behind for Mercedes. Hamilton took P3, with Webber just behind. Fernando Alonso was P6 for Ferrari, while teammate Felipe Massa, master of Istanbul Park, was one-tenth slower and finished in P9.

The afternoon qualifying session will be particularly interesting to watch, although overtaking is possible in Turkey. But there doesn't seem to be one ideal tyre compound this weekend – the car's set-up and variations in track temperature mean that some teams are setting better laps on the hard tyre, while others prefer the soft. Peak performance also varies from team to team, with some drivers setting faster times on older tyres.

Any tyre choices made in Q3 could also lead to a shake-up in tomorrow's race. There are reports of possible light rain at the circuit on Sunday. Depending on when it falls, we could have a pre-race shake-up that nullifies any choice of strategy this afternoon.

### FP3 Times (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1:27.086 18 Laps
2. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1:27.359 + 0.273 16 Laps
3. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1:27.396 + 0.310 14 Laps
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1:27.553 + 0.467 15 Laps
5. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1:27.784 + 0.698 20 Laps
6. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1:27.861 + 0.775 18 Laps
7. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1:27.879 + 0.793 16 Laps

8. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1:27.963 + 0.877 17 Laps
  9. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1:27.969 + 0.883 20 Laps
  10. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1:28.344 + 1.258 18 Laps
  11. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1:28.610 + 1.524 22 Laps
  12. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1:28.652 + 1.566 20 Laps
  13. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1:28.734 + 1.648 21 Laps
  14. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1:29.036 + 1.950 20 Laps
  15. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1:29.044 + 1.958 18 Laps
  16. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1:29.211 + 2.125 15 Laps
  17. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1:29.305 + 2.219 14 Laps
  18. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1:30.618 + 3.532 19 Laps
  19. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1:30.884 + 3.798 22 Laps
  20. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1:31.341 + 4.255 21 Laps
  21. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1:32.180 + 5.094 16 Laps
  22. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1:32.230 + 5.144 21 Laps
  23. Karun Chandhok (HRT) 1:32.762 + 5.676 19 Laps
  24. Adrian Sutil (Force India) no time set
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## F1 Sofa Blog: Q1 at Istanbul Park

So Michael Schumacher thinks he's back, much like the Terminator. The internet chatter since Monaco agrees with him – whatever the FIA and stewards decided in the wake of Schumacher's pass on Fernando Alonso, there is no doubt that we saw a stark reminder of the German's competitive spark.

But is the seven-time former champion back on form to the extent that he will be challenging for pole this weekend? In FP3 this morning he was outperformed by teammate Nico Rosberg, but the difference between P2 and P7 was only half a second, a not insurmountable margin. On Friday morning, Schumacher was just quicker than his teammate, but Rosberg reversed the order in the afternoon. The Mercedes intra-team battle will be close fought in Istanbul Park.

The real question as we wait for qualifying to begin is whether the Red Bull reliability gremlins have returned to plague the team. Friday afternoon saw an engine failure for Mark Webber in the final minutes of FP2, although the team were not concerned, saying the engine failed 50km short of its predicted lifespan.

This morning was more of a worry, however, when Webber coasted around the circuit at what looked like negative speed, thanks to a total lack of communication between throttle and engine. When the car finally returned to the garage, the Red Bull mechanics were quick to identify it as a mechanical error, relatively quick to fix.

When Webber returned to the track with 25 minutes of the session remaining, he popped up in P2 on his first flying lap, although he finished FP3 in P4, 0.467s behind his teammate in P1. If the bad luck is over with for the weekend, we could see yet more Red Bull dominance. Sebastian Vettel posted a 1:28.316s lap in 2009's Q3 to claim pole here. Vettel's fastest lap of 2010's practice sessions was this morning's 1:27.086s.

Q3 has just begun, and the Lotus and Virgin cars are first on the track, as usual. Adrian Sutil is out of the pits quickly; he was unable to set a time in this morning's practice session thanks to a minor hydraulics problem. He is not running the team's nascent F-duct this morning, unlike teammate Liuzzi, thanks to the lack of practice he's had with the device.

Action on track is heating up, but running much as expected – Fernando Alonso sets a fastest time, but is pushed down to P3 by the two McLarens. As the pits empty and times pop up on the board, the top slots are filled by the expected frontrunners. Rosberg, the two Ferraris, and both McLarens are fastest on the board, but the order is changing all the time.

Both Red Bulls are currently in the dropout zone, but neither car has set a time. As I type, Sebastian Vettel goes purple in the second sector and pops up in P3. Mark Webber sets a P6 seconds behind his teammate.

The dropout zone is the six drivers from the new teams plus Tonio Liuzzi, who span at Turn 10 and returned to the pits.

The two Red Bull drivers trade fastest times at the top of the board, with the rest of the top ten made up of both McLarens, Mercedes, Ferraris, and Renaults. While Liuzzi, in P18, is still in the pits with less than three minutes remaining, both Toro Rossos and both Williams are at risk of dropping out. Sebastian Buemi goes up to P12, and looks safe for Q2.

Liuzzi is now back on track, but is unable to get out of P18. He has enough time to set one more flying lap, but his earlier spin may have ruined his qualifying session. Adrian Sutil knocks Massa out of the top ten, but the Brazilian is safely in to Q2. Liuzzi's final lap wasn't fast enough, and the Force India driver is out of qualifying.

Dropout zone

18. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India)
19. Jarno Trulli (Lotus)
20. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus)
21. Timo Glock (Virgin)
22. Bruno Senna (HRT)
23. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin)

## F1 Sofa Blog: Q2 at Istanbul Park

I'll let you in on a little secret. I prep these pieces before qualifying starts, filling in the dropout zone with the drivers I expect to see out in each session. Thanks to the new teams, Q1 is a pretty easy guess this season – six drivers, plus one man from an old team.

Obviously I get my predictions wrong on occasion (Malaysia, anyone?), but given that the gaps between qualifying sessions is a matter of seconds – or feels like it when you're writing and filing copy, anyway – guessing now plus cut and paste later makes for a much faster roundup.

I didn't think Tonio Liuzzi would be out in Q1 this afternoon, and his poor session will increase pressure on the young drivers. There have been rumours all season that Paul di Resta will soon be behind the wheel of car 15, and it looks like the pressure is getting to Liuzzi.

The pitlane has just opened for Q2, and Jenson Button is quick to hit the track. Teammate Lewis Hamilton leaves a minute later, and the circuit begins to hum with the noise of engines. Robert Kubica is first to set a time, of 1.27.487s. Button goes P2 seconds later with a 1.27.586, but Vettel pips them both to the top.

Times are changing faster than I can type, but Hamilton is currently leading the two Red Bulls. Fernando Alonso's first time of a 1.27.666s puts him at P8, while Felipe Massa goes P6, two-tenths faster than his teammate. Vettel goes P1 by 0.08s, and the dropout zone looks certain to contain both Saubers and both Williams.

Vitaly Petrov goes faster than his teammate, and the two Renaults should be safely in to Q3. Nico Rosberg is currently at risk of dropping out in Q2; the Mercedes driver is currently in P12. Kobayashi puts Alonso into P11, with five minutes remaining of this session.

With two minutes to go on the clock, times are changing constantly. Rosberg posts a P4, pushing Sutil into the dropout zone, while Alonso gets knocked out in Q2. As things stand right now, the double champion will start in P12. Kobayashi makes it in to Q3, a real boost for the Sauber driver.

### Dropout zone

11. Adrian Sutil (Force India)
12. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
13. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber)
14. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso)
15. Rubens Barrichello (Williams)
16. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso)
17. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams)

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## F1 Sofa Blog: Q3 at Istanbul Park

The big surprise of Q2 was Fernando Alonso, who seems to be going through a troubled period. Following the Monaco Saturday crash that scuppered his chances of a win, the Spaniard has dropped out and will not be taking part in the day's final qualifying session.

This is good news for Felipe Massa, who can crash in the next ten minutes and still outqualify his teammate.

No Q3 times have been set yet, but everyone except Kobayashi – the other Q2 surprise – is out on track. Lewis Hamilton goes P1 on a purple lap, and Nico Rosberg pops up in P2. The order changes every time a driver crosses the line, and it's hard to keep up.

Sebastian Vettel is looking fast and goes P2. A minute later, Mark Webber crosses the line in P1, with a 1.26.518. The top six spots are Webber, Hamilton, Vettel, Jenson Button, Michael Schumacher, and Rosberg, as most cars are in the pits, prepping for their final flying laps.

Kamui Kobayashi looks to be a sure bet for P10, but the other positions are up for grabs as everyone's out on track for the last few minutes of Turkish qualifying. Hamilton posts another P2, and the final laps see most drivers hold position.

Schumacher has a big off at Turn 8, trashing his tyres in the process, and Mark Webber secures his fourth pole of the 2010 season. Lewis Hamilton's P2 is McLaren's first front row qualifying this year, and the 0.021s gap between Vettel and Button suggests that McLaren have made great strides towards closing the gap in qualifying. Whether or not this improvement is track-related remains to be seen.

If Hamilton can keep with Webber – and ahead of Vettel – off the start, the F-duct speed advantage could see the McLaren challenge the Red Bull for the lead. Martin Whitmarsh is confident that his team can match the Red Bulls on race pace, and tomorrow will see the team put their money where their mouth is.

Vitaly Petrov, who I tipped to surprise this weekend, made it in to Q3 for the first time this season, joining teammate Robert Kubica in the top ten. Petrov will start tomorrow's race from P9, ahead of Sauber driver Kamui Kobayashi, my bet for first pitstop of the day.

Master of Istanbul Felipe Massa qualified in P8, but both Ferraris seemed to struggle around Istanbul Park. Teammate Alonso, who will start from P12, said in a post-qualies interview that he was at the limit of the car.

Michael Schumacher just outqualified his teammate; the two Mercedes drivers were split by 0.095s and will take up the third row of tomorrow's grid.

## Provisional grid

1. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.26.295s
2. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.26.433s
3. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.26.760s
4. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.26.781s
5. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.26.857s
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.26.952s
7. Robert Kubica (Renault) 1.27.039s
8. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.27.082s
9. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1.27.430s
10. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.28.122s
11. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1.27.525s
12. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.27.612s
13. Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1.27.879s
14. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.28.273s
15. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.28.392s
16. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.28.540s
17. Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1.28.841s
18. Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1.28.958s
19. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.30.237s
20. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.30.519s
21. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.30.744s
22. Bruno Senna (HRT) 1.31.266s
23. Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1.31.989s
24. Karun Chandhok (HRT) 1.32.060s

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## F1 Sofa Blog: Istanbul Park post-qualifying analysis

Either Istanbul Park was tailor-made for the MP4-25 – and the car's performance in slow corners would suggest otherwise – or McLaren are beginning to crack their qualifying problem.

McLaren team principal Martin Whitmarsh has long been confident in his car's race pace. But as the rest of the paddock knows, any race pace is rendered semi-pointless by Red Bull's utter dominance of this season's qualifying sessions. The Milton Keynes-based team have won every pole this season, a tribute to the capabilities of engineering guru Adrian Newey.

McLaren are by no means the first team to outqualify one of the Red Bull drivers. But it is the first time that another team has joined the Red Bulls in locking out the front two rows of the grid, and that could be significant. While teams are always keen to talk up their chances before a race, there has been a jubilant air around McLaren this week, a certain confidence.

Their hard work has borne fruit in qualifying, and we will see a very interesting start as the four drivers battle for position going in to the first corner.

Immediately behind are the two Mercedes of Michael Schumacher and Nico Rosberg, and you can expect to see Schumacher charging for the front as soon as the lights go out, keen to reassert himself as a serious contender for the win. While his Monaco overtake of Fernando Alonso may have been ruled illegal, the manoeuvre has put a spring in the legend's step, and he confidently asserted 'I'm back' in an earlier interview.

Schumacher will have the added advantage of fresh rubber for the start of tomorrow's race, as a late Q3 spin saw the Mercedes driver destroy his tyres: they returned to the pits battered and studded with gravel. Starting the race on those would be hazardous to all and sundry.

On the fourth row is the Renault of Robert Kubica, who warned fans this week that Istanbul Park would be an unlikely venue for a return of Monaco's podium finish. The Polish driver qualified ahead of P8 driver Felipe Massa, a three-time winner for Ferrari at Istanbul Park.

Massa will be watching in his mirrors for the red flash of fellow Ferrari driver Fernando Alonso, who qualified P12 on tomorrow's grid. With only Vitaly Petrov and Kamui Kobayashi between them, the latter on some very fragile soft tyres, Alonso will want to use his fresh rubber advantage to make up as many places as possible at the start.

In P11, slightly ahead of Alonso, is the Force India of Adrian Sutil. If he can stay ahead of the Ferrari driver until the pack begins to thin out, the German could be a challenge to pass. Sutil was the only man able to stop Lewis Hamilton's charge at Sepang, a track not dissimilar to Istanbul Park. If he is able to work the same magic on Alonso, Massa will be able to focus on getting ahead of Kubica and the two Mercedes drivers instead obsessing over his mirrors.

Behind Alonso, the grid begins to look fairly predictable. Tonio Liuzzi is down in P17, but the middle of the pack is made up of Pedro de la Rosa's Sauber, both Toro Rossos, and the two Williams. Bringing up the rear are the three new teams, with the surprise there being Bruno Senna outqualifying Virgin driver Lucas di Grassi.

While reliability is a bugbear for a host of teams this season, it is likely that we will see a significant number of crashes and retirements tomorrow. Istanbul Park tends to see a high retirement rate, thanks in no small part to the legendary Turn 8, and the number of rookies and unreliable cars means we can expect to see some surprising finishing positions for those who manage to avoid any carnage, especially in traffic at the start.

All of the new teams have struggled with finishing races this season, and any of the six drivers could finish early tomorrow. Also vulnerable are Kobayashi and de la Rosa, as both Sauber drivers have suffered difficulties of late, retiring from more races than they've finished.

The Williams drivers have suffered far fewer retirements, but have not been making waves so far this season. Barrichello's Monaco exit was unfortunate, the loose manhole cover being no fault of his own, but neither driver has been able to do much for Williams' points tally in either championship.

There have been rumours of light rain tomorrow, which could add to the on-track action. But should the race run in the heat of the sun, the shake-ups in today's qualifying point to an interesting afternoon tomorrow. Will Whitmarsh's confidence in his team's race pace bear fruit? Only time will tell.

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## F1 Sofa Blog – The moment that mattered

There may have been 58 laps in this afternoon's race, but it was lap 40 that was the big decider.

The first two-thirds of the Turkish Grand Prix were fairly uneventful. Michael Schumacher overtook Jenson Button on the first lap, but the Brit had reclaimed position by lap 2. Sebastian Vettel and Lewis Hamilton also briefly changed position, but the order quickly settled into Mark Webber, Hamilton, Vettel, and Button at the front, with an ever-increasing gap to Schumacher behind.

Sure, there were changes in position during the pitstops, and as drivers like Nico Hulkenberg and Fernando Alonso tried to work their way back up the field, but by and large very little happened.

Most of the early action came at the hands of Lewis Hamilton, as he closed up on Mark Webber before the pitstops began. The McLaren driver was unable to get past Webber, and he lost position in the stops, coming out behind Vettel. Hamilton then had a couple of goes at passing the German, notably on lap 19, but settled down in P3, keeping pace with the two Red Bulls.

By lap 40, Vettel was on a charge. He had been lapping faster than his team mate for two or three laps, but was unable to get ahead. Approaching Turn 12, the young German saw an opportunity to overtake his teammate, and he took it. Unfortunately, he either span or turned into Webber's car, depending on your perspective, ending his race and demoting Webber to P3.

In the approach to the corner, Vettel held the inside line. In the footage he then appears to move over to the right, and the cars come together, sending Vettel into a spin and both cars off at Turn 12. Webber was able to end the race behind Jenson Button, holding P3 after a stop for a new front wing, but Vettel was out immediately.

Vettel said after his retirement "I'm not very happy now, obviously. I felt I was able to come closer [to Webber]; all of a sudden I lost the car – you can see we touched."

Sebastian Vettel's mistake cost Red Bull a likely 1-2 finish, gifting McLaren with the win and the lead in the World Constructors' Championship. Mark Webber still leads the drivers' standings, but Vettel has been demoted to fifth, behind the two McLaren drivers and Fernando Alonso.

Were it not for the shake-up on track, the standings would have been very different. Hamilton did his best to get past both Red Bull drivers, but was unable to make use of his straight-line speed advantage, thanks to the RB6's downforce advantage, especially their ability to go flat out through the legendary Turn 8. Lewis got close on a couple of occasions, but wasn't able to set up an overtaking manoeuvre worth following through.

McLaren have certainly decreased the performance gap between the MP4-25 and the RB6, but it is by no means closed. The Red Bulls are still faster in qualifying, quicker off the start, and able to maximise their cornering speeds. Were it not for some bad judgement this afternoon, the briefest of errors, it is likely the news wires would currently be singing with news of Mark Webber's third back-to-back win.

Where McLaren have the advantage – aside from on the long straights – is in their ability to capitalise on Red Bull errors, to squeeze the team into making mistakes. Until Mercedes, Renault, and Ferrari manage to catch the two McLarens, the squad from Woking is comfortably number two on pace, making them uniquely placed to apply pressure to Red Bull on and off track. And McLaren isn't yet so fast that their every tenth is the object of intense scrutiny throughout the paddock.

In terms of ability to resist pressure, the two teams are fairly evenly matched. Both Jenson Button and Mark Webber are relative elder statesmen of the paddock, experienced and level-headed. Lewis Hamilton and Sebastian Vettel are searingly talented, but prone to making hot-headed mistakes in the heat of the action.

McLaren are known to be particularly good at the development race, but Red Bull are in a position to keep pace with new parts. Dietrich Mateschitz is said to have given the team a blank cheque for upgrades; he wants to win both championships this year and is prepared to pay to keep the winning car. But McLaren have vastly more experience in turning around a bad car, and in shaving tenths from a good one.

Given that the Red Bulls have suffered ongoing – and inconsistent – reliability issues, but are still dominant in qualifying, the best place the two McLaren drivers can be at the moment is mixed up with Vettel and Webber on the front two rows. The gap to the rest of the field behind makes Button and Hamilton uniquely placed to pressure the Red Bull drivers into losing a few more leads, through either mechanical or human error.

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## F1 Sofa Blog – The great Red Bull conspiracy

Conspiracy stories are usually best left unreported, but this one will be making waves throughout the F1 community whether or not it turns out to be true.

As soon as Sebastian Vettel and Mark Webber collided at the Turkish Grand Prix, fans and pundits sought to apportion blame. Had Vettel attacked his teammate for position and lost control of his car, or did Webber squeeze the young German, forcing him on to the dirty line? But blame is irrelevant – the accident happened, no matter whose fault it was, and Red Bull's likely maximum points haul dwindled to 15.

The question being asked this evening is: was Vettel being unfairly prepped for the win, and given an advantage over his teammate?

Rumours first began to circulate shortly after the race, when Helmut Marko told reporters that the team had instructed Vettel to overtake Webber. Lewis Hamilton was closing in on the two Red Bulls, and Mark Webber – who was conserving fuel in the final stages – was not thought to be fast enough to hold off the Brit's advance. By passing Webber, Vettel could hold on to the win for Red Bull as he had marginally more fuel than his teammate and could better defend against the McLaren.

"It wasn't a situation where we were racing each other," Marko said. "We were under enormous pressure from the McLarens – they were much faster on the straights so we had to gain our advantage in the corners. [Vettel] had to attack otherwise he would have got overtaken by Hamilton – it would have been completely different if the McLarens were ten seconds behind, but that wasn't the case."

Marko told a similar story to F1.com, but appeared to blame a lack of communication for the incident: "In the situation Sebastian was in, he had no other choice than to act the way he did. We informed Mark about the situation and it is for the driver to decide. The fact is that if Sebastian hadn't passed he would have been overtaken by Hamilton. Unfortunately, Mark was not told about the situation accurately by his race engineer."

Team principal Christian Horner also appeared to back Vettel's attempted overtake: "He had an extra lap on the optimum engine setting and we couldn't back him off because he was under pressure from the McLarens. He took advantage of that – as he had every right to do."

Webber wasn't content to let his teammate slip through without a challenge – and nor should he be – and the result of the collision was a 1-2 for McLaren, a worse scenario than the one the brains on the Red Bull pitwall were trying to guard against.

In the laps leading up to the collision, Sebastian Vettel began to lap more quickly than this teammate, taking tenths off the Australian's times with every circuit. Webber was holding the lead, but had been told by the pitwall that he needed to begin conserving fuel and turn down his engine. At the same time, Vettel had been told to turn up his engine and overtake his teammate.

From those competing instructions was a conspiracy theory born.

Sebastian Vettel has long been rumoured to be Red Bull's golden boy, the German ingenue product of the Austrian race team's driver development programme. The team insist that both drivers are treated fairly at all times, but the race in Turkey has raised eyebrows throughout the paddock.

Whatever comes of the conspiracy theory, all is not well at Red Bull. What might have been a simple breakdown in communication has been turned into a civil war by sections of the media, and it is unlikely Red Bull will be allowed to forget lap 41 and move on. Under the glare of the media spotlight, any minor issues in intra-team relations will be amplified, examined, and turned into major problems.

Is the big story the Red Bull conspiracy, or will the conspiracy theory lead to a big story at Red Bull? It's all getting a bit meta for my tastes...

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## F1 Sofa Blog – Ferrari's big problem

Something is rotten in the state of Maranello.

The Scuderia are behind their rivals in both pace and development, and star driver Fernando Alonso seems to have broken a lot of mirrors recently, standing under ladders as black cats cross his path. On Friday the 13th.

Alonso has not had a brilliant season thus far, and it is testament to his skill that he currently stands third in the drivers' standings. While a win in Bahrain and a podium in Spain are not to be sniffed at, Alonso has not qualified on the front row this season – his best result was P3, in Bahrain, Australia, and China. The Shanghai Grand Prix saw the Spaniard jump the start, one in a catalogue of errors by man and team this season.

Ferrari joined McLaren in misjudging the rain during Sepang qualifying, and Alonso wrecked his car at Massenet in practice, missing out on Monaco's qualifying session. Both were honest mistakes, notable only for the fact that they involved F1 legends Ferrari, and not one of the less established teams. But after a poor result in Saturday's qualifying session at Istanbul Park, Alonso told the media that he thought his team were falling behind.

"We are not eighth and 12th fastest because of bad luck," said the Spaniard. "That's where we are because that's our level of performance."

Speaking to Spanish TV after Sunday's race, Alonso was concerned that Ferrari had slipped behind Mercedes, and were now level with Renault. "We have been a bit surprised, as both in Barcelona and here we were not too competitive," said. "All race Felipe fought with Rosberg and I fought with Petrov, so we are at Renault's level, which is obviously not enough. We have an improvement for Canada and then for Valencia we have a bigger package. But we know McLaren and Red Bull are very far away, and we don't know if that's enough, so we have to work very hard."

Alonso is far from the only person concerned with Ferrari's current level of performance. It was a talking point throughout the race weekend, a sad way to celebrate the marque's 800th Grand Prix.

Team principal Stefano Domenicali said of Saturday's qualifying that "our performance did not live up to our expectations", while Felipe Massa, thrice winner of the Turkish Grand Prix for Ferrari, was concerned about the Scuderia's relative pace. "We were slower than our main rivals, so we will have to work very hard to get back to fighting for the top places and there can be no doubt about that," the Brazilian said.



"We were fighting the Renaults. Felipe was battling with Kubica and I was with Petrov. We don't want to be battling with Renault for eighth, we want to be competing with Red Bull and McLaren. Ferrari underperformed both here in Turkey and in Barcelona, so we need to understand why," Alonso said after Sunday's race.

While the team are optimistic that future upgrades will see them competing at the front from Valencia, that does not take into account upgrades made by their rivals. Since the teams arrived in Europe, the Ferraris have struggled to keep pace with their rivals in qualifying.

McLaren demonstrated this weekend that they have reduced the gap to Red Bull. Mercedes, while not similarly competitive, finished fourth and fifth, separated from the Ferraris by Robert Kubica's Renault.

If the Scuderia do not increase the rate of development, they are at serious risk of spending the rest of the season running with the fast mid-field, and not tearing away at the front with the other big players. This is especially worrying when you remember that Ferrari halted development on the F60 mid-season, with the aim of concentrating on 2010's challenger.

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