

F1 Australian Grand Prix – Thursday press conference

It was the first press conference of the 2012 Formula 1 season, and it was no surprise to see Kimi Raikkonen called to do his duty before the assembled media.

And Kimi performed as only he can, in true taciturn style. Some find it rude, others find it funny, but it's pure Raikkonen. If Kimi on track is as unchanged as Kimi in a press conference, this should be one mega season.

Present were Jenson Button (McLaren), Charles Pic (Marussia), Kimi Räikkönen (Lotus), Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso), Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), and Mark Webber (Red Bull).

Charles, it's looking like a pretty tough initiation for you into Formula 1 with no testing of the new car, brand new car tomorrow. Tell us what your thoughts are.

Charles PIC: Yes, we have had not so much driving but we made an ad day in Silverstone for the shakedown and everything went fine. So looking forward to tomorrow and hopefully it will be dry to have some kilometres.

Charles, how important has it been to have the mileage in the old car?

CP: Yeah, very important. I made two days in Barcelona. We were able to make many laps so it was just great for me. It was very, very helpful.

Was it a big step up from GP2 to Formula 1?

CP: Yes, of course, you have much more things to do and you have to understand in a very short space of time.

Kimi, welcome back. How much has Kimi changed in the two years that you've been doing WRC? And how much has your driving changed during that time?

Kimi RÄIKKÖNEN: Oh, I don't know really. I don't think a lot, a little bit older, that's all. It's the same really.

Has it been good to be back in a Formula 1 car again?

KR: Yeah, it was nice. It really hasn't changed a lot, the car feels pretty similar, the tyres are slightly different but I was expecting to have more difficulties with them but they seem pretty good, especially when they are new – but of course they will wear out a bit faster but it's been nice to drive.

We've seen pretty good pace from you and Romain Grosjean your team-mate, how real is that pace?

KR: We could probably have gone a bit faster if we wanted but I don't know what the others are doing. The car feels good, the lap time at least in testing was OK – whether it's enough we will see over the weekend and over the next races but so far it has been OK.

Daniel, obviously your home race, how big is this race? Was your first Formula 1 race bigger or is this it?

Daniel RICCIARDO: I think the first one last year in Silverstone was still pretty hectic. I think not having the preparation as I have at the start of this year probably made it a bit more intense. I've had a lot of media attention the last couple of days but I think the on-track stuff was, or will be, more intense in Silverstone. But yeah, I understand what Mark means about the attention here. It's pretty full-on but it's been nice, really supportive. And hopefully I'll just get out on track and do a good job over the weekend.

You're obviously with a new team with Scuderia Toro Rosso and in testing it looked as if it's pretty good, certainly the first test looked pretty good, perhaps less so since then. What are your feelings about the team?

DR: It's a good opportunity for me this year, it's progress from last year and we'll be fighting further up the grid. I think it's hard to know where we are. From what I see the top teams are still going to be more or less the top teams or at least the top two or three but the midfield does seem a bit more tight. So yeah, I think everyone showed signs of potential but until Saturday qualifying and Sunday racing we probably won't know where we all really stand. But I think realistically we're still in the group we were in last year but it does seem like it's closed up. So there's probably more opportunity to leapfrog a few.

Mark, your 11th Australian Grand Prix – just to remind you if you didn't know – and also of course you were the winner of the last grand prix as well, though it was some time ago, how are you feeling coming into this one?

Mark WEBBER: Good, yeah! We had a pretty good winter, the team worked incredibly hard so we need to see how it's going to unveil this weekend obviously, and then Malaysia is just around the corner, so we have two big races, we're going to get a really good snapshot of the performances of the cars, and we feel like we've done pretty well but we have McLaren and Ferrari and Lotus and Mercedes, lots of good guys doing well so it's going to be very exciting and difficult to see who's going to do the business until we get going.

As an honest opinion, is it nervousness or excitement or apprehension – how do you start a new season like this?

MW: Probably a little bit of all of that. I think there's a little bit of rust in all the teams, obviously we haven't raced for a while so you're looking at pit stops and strategy and drivers because we haven't competed for a while. So, that's always interesting to get on top of that at the first grand prix. I think we're all just looking forward to getting our helmets on and getting on with it now. Obviously we've been talking about it for nine weeks now, about who's doing what and we're just sick of talking about it and want to get out there and get on with it.

Sebastian, a previous winner here and twice on pole. How much emphasis has there been in testing on qualifying pace? We get the feeling that we haven't seen qualifying pace in testing and yet I would have thought for you it was very important last year in the races that you won.

Sebastian VETTEL: I think, no doubt, qualifying is always very important. It's usually easier when you start from the front so yeah, I think generally as the other drivers said already it was difficult to read testing one hundred per cent – so we've got a feeling: first of all it's important to have a good feeling about yourself, about the car, how you feel in the car. We were quite happy with that, surely it didn't always go to plan but overall we can be happy and as I said it's unknown at this stage what is going to happen. It's good to finally be here and only a couple of days before we really find out.

When is going to be the first indication? Very often people say 'you won't know until Melbourne' and then we get to Melbourne and they say 'wait until qualifying' or then it's the race. When exactly is it?

SV: It's the same again. I think nothing has changed to be honest. Now, we say after qualifying we will know a bit more and surely then you need to see. This is the first race, there are many more to come. This track is very different to, let's say, a 'normal' race track, such as the track we have been to a couple of weeks ago in Barcelona. So, tomorrow we will not know that much more regarding the pace. Surely the guys who will be on top will be the ones to beat. Again, we will give you the same answers. You don't know about fuel etc. Really, we have to wait until Saturday and then it's the first couple of races that will show you a trend. Sooner than that is really not possible.

Quite a lot has been made about you chasing a third title. Have you thought about that at all?

SV: I'm here to win the championship, so that's the target. Whether it's the third or not wouldn't make a difference. Well, it would but... it would be a nice thing but as I said the reason we're here is to race and to win and the season is long, so there are a lot of races to come.

Jenson, like Sebastian and Kimi you've won here before, you've had two wins actually. You made your debut here as well. What are your feelings about the Australian Grand Prix?

Jenson BUTTON: First of all, I think it's exciting for us all to start a new season. You do all the hard work over the winter of testing and what have you, and I think we all get very excited about coming to the first race in Melbourne. It's the perfect place to start the F1 season. It's good to be here. I've always enjoyed driving around Albert Park from the first time I drove here, and there have been a couple of special occasions for me, in '09 and 2010. It's nice to be back and nice to come here having had a good winter as well. The last couple of years have been a little bit tricky for us over the winter but this winter everything seems to have gone to plan. It's difficult to know where we stand, as everyone has said, but I'm happy with what we've done.

And at least you're going to hit the ground running at the start?

JB: We hope so, yes. You know, everyone always says it's important to get points on the board at the start of the year. We all know that, it's not a new thing.

What do you think about having two DRS zones here this year?

JB: I think it's great. If you have a good DRS system it's good for you and ours is pretty good. You always think that if you're quick enough you don't want DRS because you're leading the race but if you're a little bit further back in the pack it's good to have two zones. Whether it's going to make much of a difference I don't know. The one DRS zone here (last year) was... some of us complained that it wasn't good enough to overtake but I think it was the right amount. It made overtaking tricky, which is what it should be, but it gave you the opportunity. So we'll have to wait and see what the two zones do.

For the three guys who've won the world title up to now. Could you just tell me who your grand prix hero is? And Kimi, if you decide you want to say you still haven't got a hero, then could just tell me who you admired when you were coming up through the ranks?

SV: Kimi to start!

KR: I still don't have one! Of course, I was hoping for good results for Finns but I didn't really... it didn't make any difference who won it then. There wasn't one guy I hoped for or was looking up to so...

SC: Nice try...

JB: Do you still want ours or not?

SV: Obviously, when I was growing up, and I think similar to a lot of kids at that age in Germany, we were admiring Michael [Schumacher]. He was our hero, he was my hero. I had posters of him on my wall. And when I got a bit older I took them off and put some other posters on the wall, but anyway... So I was looking up to Michael but there have been and there are a lot of great drivers. For sure for me Michael is one of them.

JB: For me, it was a little bit earlier than Michael. For me it was Ayrton [Senna] and Alain [Prost] back in the early '80s, because that's when I started watching Formula 1, at seven or eight years old. Obviously 'Our Nige' [Nigel Mansell] has got to be up there, just for the moustache more than anything else. But yeah, it's difficult. Those are the guys I watched when I was younger. I suppose you get some inspiration from them and you want to be like them in the future. That's obviously a lot of our aims.

A question for Kimi. In this your second career, what do you bring from your experience at Ferrari?

KR: I don't think this is my second career. I've been racing all the time, just in a different thing. I've been racing at a few different teams and all the teams run a slightly different way, mainly because they are all different nationalities, but you always learn from all the people and all of the teams and I have good memories, most of the time, of the teams. I try to get things in the team how I know I like it and I'm very happy with the team, they've been great people to work with – easygoing, no real need to change anything, and just if you like to do something differently, they're happy to try to do it that way and it's just been a good experience.

Kimi, in 2007, when you started your first race with Ferrari, you won here: it was quite a big surprise. In winter testing, you have been very fast and many people have been saying you could be the surprise here this year as well. Do you think this is something we can expect, or are you ruling that out?

KR: Like I said before, I have no idea where we are going to be. We had a good winter, it could have been better but hopefully we are fast. We will know during the weekend but I think that many teams will be fast so... Are we going to be in the front? I don't know, we hope we are going to be but let's wait and see.

For all of you: what do you think about the new noses of Formula 1 cars, from the onboard point of view and as a viewer? Is it a shame for TV viewers or spectators?

JB: Ours looks great.

MW: You can't see the nose from the cockpit so it doesn't matter if it's last year or this year, you can't see it. Honestly. You laugh, but you can't see it so it doesn't really matter. Even if the front wing is not on the car we can't see it so... we're very low in the car as I found out in Monza last year. The looks? Yeah, they look ugly, for sure. That's disappointing. Adrian (Newey) always make beautiful cars. I still think ours looks better than the McLaren but the McLaren looks nice but we will see which one gets the most champagne. It's an ugly regulation but that's the way most of the teams have gone.

This isn't a new completely new question but it would be interesting to hear from you about the regulations regarding your positioning on the track. You can change position once but when you come back to your original position, you must leave room for your competitor. Will it be easy to judge that, and for you, the drivers, how can you manage it?

SV: I think generally with this whole rule debate, whatever, I don't think anything has changed, to be honest. Yes, there's a little bit more in writing but I always found that there's a code of honour, if you like, or a gentlemen's agreement. If you're racing someone, I think you are allowed to race him hard but you should always give him enough room. Surely, here and there you might disagree but I think most of the time it has worked and people raced fairly against each other, so I don't see that the rule will change much, to be honest. It's not natural to... you're not racing to push someone off. You're trying to defend your position if someone tries to overtake and equally, you're trying to overtake if someone tries to defend, then you at least expect to have enough (room) to survive.

JB: I don't think anything's changed for us. We had that rule last year anyway, it just wasn't in writing, but it's the case for us for a couple of years now.

Kimi, you have come here with many new cars. Compared to 2004, let's say, McLaren, 2009, Ferrari, is this better or worse? How do you feel?

KR: Usually you have a new car here every year, so it's not a big surprise. I don't know, it's different tyres, the car feels very similar in the test to what I remember in the past. You have DRS, it's just a button that you push, it doesn't really change the driving itself a lot. It feels similar, I don't have very good things to compare, really, because it's a few years since I last drove a Formula 1 car. It doesn't feel much different.

We will have six World Champions in this year's championship but no Italian drivers. Most of you raced in Italy in go-karts or drove for an Italian team. May I have a short explanation about this situation, why it's so difficult for the Italians to grow up and come into Formula 1?

MW: Daniel, yeah, exactly, Daniel. You have an Italian passport Daniel or not?

DR: (Speaks mock American-Italian!) If you watched Family Guy you probably know what I'm talking about. I see a lot of things as coincidence. I haven't been around long enough to know the reasons for it. Yeah, that's probably the way I'll see it. It's not like the Italian drivers are doing anything wrong. There are two Australians on the grid now, a few people from other countries and whatnot. I don't know the answer. I lived in Italy as well and raced there and the competition was always fierce and there were some Italian drivers at the top but there were also a lot of other European guys and whatnot. For me, it's probably more just coincidence. I don't know if there's any more intelligence behind it.

SV: When I was in karting and I raced in Italy it was always the toughest challenge to go to Italy and race the guys there but there were a lot of Italian drivers that I admired when I was young throughout the classes: in my class but also in the higher classes. I don't really understand... maybe it's the Italian industry not being open enough to spend money on young talents. I don't know. If I compare to Germany, generally I think you will have years when you have, I don't know, three German drivers, no French drivers, then four or five French drivers and no German drivers, five English drivers. So it changes. Last year we had complaints from French journalists that we didn't have a French driver. This year we have three French drivers in Formula 1. This is how quickly it changes. It's a shame to see on one hand that there are a lot of talents from Italy, young drivers. I remember a lot of guys I raced against. It was pretty impressive what they did but then not to see them in the junior categories in single-seaters, so throughout BMW, Formula Three and later on. The problem is that motor sport became - always has been - but lately became quite expensive, so you really need the support from early on. I think motorbikes are quite big in Italy and there's a lot of drivers from Italy in MotoGP for instance, but not necessarily in Formula 1.

Kimi, you've been in Formula 1 for many years and the last two years you've been watching from the outside; what do you like the best from Formula 1 and what is the worst for you?

KR: I didn't see much in the last few years so, like I said, it's the same people, similar stuff going on. In my mind, it hasn't really changed a lot. I have nothing really to comment on that.

I just saw Daniel take a picture, I suppose it will be Tweeted. It is not as extreme as Brad Keselowski from the car during Daytona but... But Seb, why don't you Tweet? Come on!

SV: I don't like it. There are some good new technologies but I prefer to talk to people.

Kimi, if Formula 1 is so far from you that you didn't even watch the race, why did you come back?

KR: I had other things to do than watch the races. It doesn't mean that I don't like the sport. If I didn't like it, I wouldn't be here. I always liked the sporting and the racing but like I said, I was busy doing other stuff. I watched some races when I was home and it was on TV, but I didn't try to go to the TV and watch it somewhere, like it was something I had to do. I'm happy to be back, like I said, otherwise I wouldn't have come back but I like the racing in Formula 1.

I would like to ask all of you if you like Melbourne and do you think it's important to keep Australia on the calendar?

MW: Of course, yes. I think it's in the top three on the calendar. I think that we should work hard to keep it here. I don't think there's many people who don't like coming here. Of course the flight's a little bit long but once you're here it's a pretty good place. It's a very well organised event. It's one of the few events where Bernie actually trusts the organisation to have lots of different categories racing in amongst the Formula 1 schedule, which you can hear now on Thursday and there's still stuff going on. It's the same on Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Definitely one of the best events of the year, so we need to keep the best events because not all the races we go to are like this.

SV: I think it's a great race like Mark said. Obviously it's his home Grand Prix but I think that for most of us Australia is far away but it's definitely part of the calendar and should always be. I think the people here are very enthusiastic about racing, very passionate and I think it needs Formula 1. It's a great place to be and I'm looking forward to being here but also to come back in the future.

JB: Yup. I totally agree. This is the best place to start the season, it really is. I heard of talk of it possibly being somewhere else in Australia - I don't know if that is true - but personally I love Melbourne. I think it's a great way to start the season. The circuit's obviously very different to most circuits we drive - it's a street circuit - but it's a lot of fun, I've had some good years here.

CP: Yes, for me, it was the first time here in Melbourne and in Australia, very nice city, very nice parks to do some sport in, and a very nice track, so it's all very nice and I'm looking forward to driving the track tomorrow.

MR: It's a nice place to come, nice race usually, exciting races, things happen and hopefully it stays. As Mark says, it's a bit far away to come but once you're here it's OK.

DR: Yeah, of course, I'm all for it. Yeah, any excuse to come back to your home country but to have a race here is amazing. I think it's a great city. I've spent quite a few years racing karts here as a kid, so it was always a nice event to come to Melbourne. I did drive the track last year in P1. I thought the circuit was very good as well. I'm a fan of street circuits, it's bumpy, it's close to walls, it's got good character, so there's a lot reasons why it should stay. Now that I've given Mark some support on the Australian front, hopefully it will stay a bit longer.

Following the track thread a bit, you guys have all had long careers and driven on a number of different circuits. If you could pick one circuit, taking the event out of equation, just picking one circuit, what's your favourite track – ever?

JB: Wow, that's a tough one. Obviously you'd look at most on the F1 calendar for your best track. For me I love the fast flowing circuits, I think we all do, like Spa or Suzuka but also circuits on other calendars. Macau is crazy to drive in an F3 car, good experiences there. And some other circuits in karting. It's difficult to pick one.

CP: For me, I think it's Nurburgring and Barcelona.

KR: Spa

DR: I think that out of the F1 calendar I think Macau as well. I would definitely vote to race an F1 around there. I think it would be awesome.

MW: Spa

SV: I've got more than one. The question was name your favourite one. I don't have only one so...

F1 Australian Grand Prix – F1 report

As the pitlane opened on a damp track at Albert Park for the first practice session of the 2012 Formula 1 season, it fell to Jean-Eric Vergne to lay down the first bits of rubber.

The Toro Rosso driver left the pits on Pirelli's intermediate tyre, followed swiftly by the bulk of the grid. While no one wanted to waste rubber, the first few minutes of the session were devoted to a series of installation laps from almost all and sundry.

Thanks to the changeable track conditions – wet, greasy, damp, and dry – teams avoided doing much running in F1, with the most laps completed by a single driver topping out at a lowly 26.

Initial runs on inters were followed by an intense period of relative silence as teams waited for the track to dry out completely after the morning showers. Charles Pic told Marussia that the track was too dry for inters and too wet for dry tyres, which summed up the morning quite well. For around one hour of the allotted ninety minutes, track conditions were such that inters were being eaten in a single lap. Given the variable conditions on offer in Melbourne, the smart money was on saving inters for Saturday and Sunday, should they be needed.

Thanks to the limited running, it's hard to say much about the session. McLaren, Red Bull, and Mercedes all looked fast, as was predicted in winter testing. The real surprise was Ferrari – despite the team admitting to problems in Jerez and Barcelona, Fernando Alonso looked very competitive on single-lap pace, eventually finishing the session fourth in the standings.

Kamui Kobayashi and Daniel Ricciardo should both be singled out for their F1 efforts. Ricciardo put on an impressive show of pace and demonstrated just why Red Bull have so much faith in him as a star of the future. The Australian driver may have found extra motivation in his home crowd, but his cornering was impeccable, and the STR7 performed well in Ricciardo's hands.

Kobayashi, on the other hand, appeared to be having more fun than anyone else on track. In the press room chatter Will Buxton joked that the Japanese driver was using car lengths to measure the width of the track, throwing himself round corners nearly sideways. But the fact that he was having fun didn't disguise the fact that Kobayashi was also very confident in the Sauber's performance in the damp. He may not have ended the session on top, but he did sit comfortably atop of the standings for much of the ninety minutes.

Kimi Raikkonen only managed to complete eight laps in F1; the Finnish driver was unhappy with the steering column and lost a lot of track time as Lotus worked to change it. Despite the lost time, however, Raikkonen ended the session one second faster than teammate Romain Grosjean, who completed twice as many laps.

Felipe Massa had the reddest face of F1 when he beached his Ferrari in the gravel. The Brazilian driver is living on borrowed time at the Scuderia, and spinning backwards into the run-off area has not helped his cause any. Massa was approaching Turn 13 when he popped one wheel onto the grass, span wildly, and drifted into the gravel, unable to move.

Neither HRT driver was able to set a timed lap in this session. Pedro de la Rosa's car only passed its scrutineering early this morning, and the team were not confident that the Spanish driver would be out on track in F1.

Narain Karthikeyan managed three installation laps before the engine began to overheat, and shut down as a precautionary measure. The Indian racer was sidelined for the rest of the session, and may not be able to run this afternoon.

F1 times (unofficial)

1. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.27.560s [11 laps]
2. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.27.805s [14 laps]
3. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.28.235s [17 laps]
4. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.28.360s [21 laps]
5. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.28.360s [21 laps]
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.28.467s [22 laps]
7. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.28.908s [23 laps]

8. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.29.415s [16 laps]
 9. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.29.565s [8 laps]
 10. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.29.722s [26 laps]
 11. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.29.790s [21 laps]
 12. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.29.865s [17 laps]
 13. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.29.881s [18 laps]
 14. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.29.953s [21 laps]
 15. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.30.124s [22 laps]
 16. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.30.515s [16 laps]
 17. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.30.586s [16 laps]
 18. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.30.743s [11 laps]
 19. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.31.178s [17 laps]
 20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.31.983s [8 laps]
 21. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.34.730s [8 laps]
 22. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.40.256s [11 laps]
 23. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) NO TIME SET [3 laps]
 24. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) NO TIME SET [10 laps]
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F1 Australian Grand Prix – FP2 report

It started in silence and ended in chaos.

The rain-soaked second free practice session of the Australian Grand Prix weekend looked like it might not happen at all. Half an hour before the pitlane was due to open, there was a mini river running down the middle of the road. But the Melbourne sunshine prevailed, and track conditions were deemed safe for F1 cars.

The Sauber pair were the first drivers out on track, skitting around Albert Park like an F1 car on an aquaplane. But Pirelli's wet tyres did the trick, a few minor spins aside.

Over the course of the session the track dried out enough, first for a switch to inters, and then to mediums, before the final few minutes saw chaos on the timesheets as teams began to post fastest laps on the softer compound.

Nico Hulkenberg looked like he might hold onto the top slot until the chequered flag fell, but countryman Michael Schumacher disabused him of that notion when the elder German crossed the start/finish line in 1.29.183s, one-tenth faster than Hulkenberg's best effort.

There were some surprises in the timesheets this afternoon, particularly from Timo Glock, who ended the day in P12 for Marussia, and Heikki Kovalainen who managed P8 for Caterham. While both teams had hoped to make significant leaps forward over the winter, it's more likely that a combination of low fuel and changeable track conditions led to those surprise placings.

More likely, but not definite – the downside of the afternoon's rain is that we still lack a clear picture of the teams' relative performance.

Both Sauber drivers appear to enjoy the wet, spins aside, but that's more down to the number of soggy laps completed, and not their outright pace. Any car with so little sponsorship on the sides is going to spend a significant chunk of the fly-aways doing their best to drum up more funding.

It was interesting to see Sebastian Vettel lapping Albert Park. While not much should be read into the defending champion's P10 result at the end of the session, it was surprising to see the Red Bull driver – who took his first win in the wet in Monza 2008 – complete ragged lap after ragged lap as he pushed to improve his time.

Either Red Bull didn't nail the wet weather set-up this afternoon (easily done), or Vettel was under too much self-imposed pressure to drive with the grace we're accustomed to seeing from Formula 1's youngest double champion.

With weather conditions for the rest of the weekend expected to improve, there's little sense in using this afternoon's times to determine relative performance.

One thing that can be said, however, is that Mercedes' pre-season confidence doesn't appear to have been overly misplaced. Schumacher and teammate Nico Rosberg were both in control in the wet, although the younger German was significantly slower than the man who has won the Australian Grand Prix in Albert Park more times than any other driver.

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.29.183s [16 laps]
2. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.29.292s [19 laps]
3. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.30.199s [23 laps]
4. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.30.341s [13 laps]
5. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.30.709s [14 laps]
6. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.31.466s [13 laps]
7. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.31.505s [14 laps]
8. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.31.932s [16 laps]
9. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.32.184s [17 laps]
10. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.32.194s [19 laps]

11. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.32.296s [20 laps]
 12. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.32.632s [17 laps]
 13. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.32.767s [15 laps]
 14. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.32.822s [11 laps]
 15. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.33.039s [18 laps]
 16. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.33.252s [11 laps]
 17. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.34.108s [21 laps]
 18. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.34.275s [7 laps]
 19. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.34.312s [17 laps]
 20. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.34.485s [29 laps]
 21. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.34.604s [31 laps]
 22. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.34.770s [13 laps]
 23. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.42.627s [16 laps]
 24. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) NO TIME SET [1 lap]
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F1 Australian Grand Prix – Friday press conference

It was a mixed bag of questions for the team representatives called forth to face the media for the first Friday press conference of the 2012 season.

With questions encompassing the RRA, the passive F-duct, and F1 ownership, the team figures weren't given an easy start to the season's grillings.

Present were Eric Boullier (Lotus), Ross Brawn (Mercedes), Paul Hembery (Pirelli), Adam Parr (Williams), and Luis Perez-Sala (HRT).

Luis, it must have been an extraordinary experience coming here, you had so much work to do. Just give us some indication of what it's been like?

Luis PÉREZ-SALA: For us it has been almost a success just to be here in Melbourne because it has been very tough. We missed the crash test at the beginning of February and then almost until the end of February we were working to try and pass the crash test. Then, once we have done that, we went to a filming day at Barcelona, this helped us a bit, and here we have been working last night, the whole night, to have ready at least the second car. And in P1 we were running only with one car, several laps, three or four laps, and then in P2 we could afford to run at least the installation lap with Pedro's [de la Rosa] car.

How worried are you about qualifying, do you think you can get both cars in [to the race]?

LP-S: It will be difficult for us. I'm not thinking now about the speed of the cars, now we are trying to fit all of things to make do as best as possible to make P3 tomorrow, doing several laps and then we will see on the qualifying. For us Melbourne is like a place where we are going to take certain information from the cars and go forwards for the next races.

Your championship really starts in Malaysia.

LP-S: We hope! I will see. For us the most important thing is to be here as we are and then to try to learn as much as possible. Of course the team is a bit tired as well, they have been working hard for the last month and I would like them to relax a bit and take information and we will see if it's Shanghai or Malaysia-Shanghai, whenever we start to do our real pace and then trying to improve and to get better and better through the season.

Good luck.

LP-S: We need it!

Paul, obviously this is the start of your second season. How different is it this year to one year ago?

Paul HEMBERY: I would probably have made similar comments to Luis last year at this time, having to get ready in a short space of time. Obviously experience is great, you understand, even from the small things like logistics, which help a lot in this world because it's a complex world from a logistical side and there's a lot of things that go on in the sport that I guess are invisible to the outside world. So, yeah, it's a much better position to be in.

The teams are saying that the tyres don't seem to be degrading as much, is that the case? What's been the reaction to the new tyres?

PH: I think it's early days to see that. They're certainly degrading – whether it's enough or not I don't know – if the comments are too positive Bernie calls me up and gives me an earful! I think the general balance of the car, judging from the comments of the drivers and the teams is that they're happy with the balance. Part of that is a few of the small changes that we've made. Also I think the teams have had more time to design the cars around the tyres this season. So, I think it's a combination of the two things.

Looking at the amount of running they've had today, very little dry running – where would you say the teams are in preparation for this race?

PH: I think you have to ask them that. When they did do a run in the dry I guess they're all using different fuel loads and they've all got different programmes in mind, what they're trying to achieve in the sessions. But I think the general comment that everyone's seen so far in testing is that the cars seem to be much closer together in terms of performance this year than last year – and hopefully that's going to mean we're going to have a great season.

Adam, first of all, to what extent are we seeing a new Williams team? A number of things have changed, tell us about the team as it stands now.

Adam PARR: We have made a lot of changes but hopefully nothing of any importance because Williams, part of the secret is trying to keep what we have as a team – but we've made a number of changes, we've got a new technical leadership who've been able to deliver this car but we have another 500 people who haven't changed. I'm really pleased we've been able to completely redesign the car top to bottom, change engines, and without missing a trick. We did a lot of mileage in testing, so that's all gone very nicely. On the board side Claire [Williams] is stepping up to join our board as

director of marketing and communications in early April and we're very excited about that. I think she's going to be a fantastic asset for this team – and the great thing is no-one can poach her!

Another point is that you've got two relatively inexperienced drivers, whereas you had Rubens [Barrichello] with a massive amount of experience. How has that gone and how, in turn, has Alex Wurz been able to contribute?

AP: I think it's very early to say, isn't it? But what I do feel is both Bruno and Pastor are... they're not in their first seasons in Formula 1, they are very competitive and I think they can have a lot of fun between the two of them and with the team. Alex is playing the role of a wise head and mentoring them as necessary, and so far, so good.

How much are you asking him to do? Giving him a free rein to talk to the drivers?

AP: Yes, he has an absolutely free rein and he attends the debriefs etc, and how he does it is up to him. He should know better than anyone what he has to do.

Ross, first of all it couldn't be a better start to the season could it – than to be top on the first day?

Ross BRAWN: Well, it's certainly better than being at the back! The only reason I qualify it is that we have no idea what people are running on fuel. We've had little windows of running on the dry. Our cars were doing different things to try to understand and get some information for tomorrow because we've got one hour of timed practice before we have to go into qualifying and, as Paul commented, we don't really know these tyres very well yet, because testing in the winter in Barcelona with a heavily rubbered track is not giving us all the information we need to know how to use the tyres, what strategy to choose and so on and so forth. So we're trying to get snapshots in these weather conditions of what's going on. It's been a reasonably encouraging start but we're not getting carried away because different people were doing different things today.

In terms of preparation you missed out the first test with the new car, you obviously hit the ground running with it for the two Barcelona tests – how different has it been starting this season to last season?

RB: We're much better prepared than we were last year. Last year we were not in good shape at this stage of the season. We'd tried to leave it as late as possible to run the final aerodynamic package and that hadn't gone that well, and we had some cooling issues, some other functionality issues of the car and that takes a lot of resource out of the organisation fixing those things. So, we made a big effort to strengthen the team, do things more effectively, and to arrive at the beginning of this season in a much better state of preparation. I must commend the people who've been involved with that. As Adam was saying, we're keen to strengthen the team without losing the strengths that we already have. So, Bob Bell has been a great asset to the team, Bob's been involved in this car from the beginning. He's done a great job of the organisation, keeping everyone to schedule, getting the right decisions made, so we're not where we want to be yet in many ways but we're a lot better than we were 12 months ago. And if we can keep that rate of progress going, then I'm extremely optimistic for the future. We're in a place now where the car functions well, it cools well, it does all the basic things properly. And all of our resource can be focussed on trying to find performance for the next part of the season.

Everybody's talking about your supposed front-wing stalling system, is there anything you can tell us?

RB: Well, I can tell you it's great for Formula 1, because for me the magic of Formula 1 is not just the drivers, it's the technology, the engineering, the innovation, the stories that fill the web pages and the media. It's something that I think is a great thing for Formula 1. When I hear these people talking about how we need to have standard cars and just let the drivers... they miss the whole point of Formula 1, which is the magic of everything that happens in Formula 1. You know, we've got drivers out there, world champions, who are perhaps not in the best car at the moment and that's a story. That's a great aspect of Formula 1. We have world champions in much better cars and the teams without the better cars have got to fix that and improve. So it's great people are talking about different things. Today it's us, tomorrow it will be somebody else. That's why Formula 1 is so fascinating, why it's so appealing to our fans and enthusiasts.

Eric, sorry to keep you waiting first of all. How much of a setback was losing the first Barcelona test?

Eric BOULLIER: Obviously we missed some track time, some development time of the systems and some track time for the drivers as well, as obviously they were not racing last year in Formula 1. But I have to say that number one, we have a reliable car and we were able to do a lot of mileage in Jerez and at the second Barcelona test.

Kimi had some problems with comfort in the car in Barcelona. Is he still having those problems now or was it something different today?

EB: It's very similar, let's say. But also it's a new chassis and you have to adjust a little bit his position in the car.

Are you curing that?

EB: Of course, definitely.

And Romain today? How quickly did he learn the circuit and do you feel confident in him now?

EB: Yes, I think he showed in the second session that he was now ready to drive and he knew the track. This morning you could see that the conditions were a bit tricky and this is why we waited for the best conditions for him to go out and learn the track, as we think... the forecast is for it to be dry on Sunday.

Are they working well together, those two? One would say they might be slightly different personalities?

EB: Yes, I have to say it's matching quite well. I mean they are team-mates, they are professional drivers and they work well. We have no issues with this.

May I ask all of you your feelings about racing in Bahrain in four weeks' time?

RB: We want to go there. It's been a great place to race in the past. It has its troubles, we hope those troubles are largely behind them and if racing can help bring things together then we should try and do it. We need to monitor the situation, try and make a judgement. People who've been there are telling us the situation's much, much better than it was 12 months ago. So, as I say, if Formula 1 can help to improve the situation then that would be a great thing for us to do. But it's certainly clearly a lot calmer situation than it was 12 months ago.

I believe that a letter was addressed and sent to the Federation regarding the Resource Restriction Agreement (RRA) being enshrined in the regulations. If so, which teams signed, which teams didn't sign and also, what do you hope to achieve and how, please?

RB: I answered the last one.

AP: I think you should do this one as well.

EB: We have many correspondences with the FIA on many many subjects and yes, one of the subjects was the RRA and trying to find a way to maybe make the FIA involved in the process of reinforcing the RRA through an idea like sporting regs. So we just contacted the FIA and Jean Todt to try to set up a group together to discuss the matter.

My question was also who signed and who didn't sign the letter. Was it unanimous?

EB: Yes, it was unanimous. Most of the teams have signed it.

Most. Who not?

EB: Doesn't matter.

AP: I thoroughly agree with what Eric just said, with everything he said.

Eric, we saw that Kimi didn't get very many laps in either session today. Was that just comfort or were there problems with his steering column and you changed it?

EB: Second session was just planned. Because of the rain, we didn't want to run in the wet conditions so we just waited for a dry situation.

I was interested by Ross's comments about the excitement of the technical challenge of Formula 1, which is obviously an ongoing thing. But it still costs all of you millions. Some of you have more than a hundred people in your aero department. I wonder if there are any savings that could be made which would be acceptable to the technician in you, for example, a standard under-car aerodynamic profile?

RB: I'm a little bit reluctant to have standard parts on the car. I'm a great supporter of the concept of the Resource Restriction Agreement, that we have a certain amount of money, a certain number of people we can use and we try and get the cleverest people to do the best job and we win because those people are doing a better job than other people in other teams, not because we've spent twice as much as somebody else. Certainly Mercedes' principle is not to steamroller Formula 1 with unlimited resource and win on the power of what we've spent. We're very prudent, we want Formula 1 to be a good example and we believe that the Resource Restriction and some sensible technical regulations and sporting regulations is the best way. There is an argument that perhaps we need to make sure that as we tighten the resource restriction that we don't end up moving all the activity into the aerodynamic field because that's perhaps the area of greatest return for investment, and we do need regulations to make sure that we keep a spread. So I think there can be quite strong constraints to make sure that we don't have cars which are just purely focused on aerodynamics but I'm not a great fan of standardising parts but perhaps in keeping parts within a closer constraint.

AP: I agree with Ross. The prime area of means of controlling costs should be controlling expenditure and that's what the Resource Restriction Agreement... in part the Singapore agreement which was signed by all teams 18 months or so ago. That's the primary way of controlling costs because in the past, attempts to cure them purely by technical rules just squeezed the balloon into another shape. However, I think there is also a desire to look at areas of the car that have become ludicrously over-complicated. An example is used of the corners of the car. I think we have over 130 moulds for one brake duct now. And I'm not sure that that does genuinely add to the show. What does add to the show is when people come up with clever ideas, and you can only really have that if you control overall spending, because otherwise it is the more money you've got, the more clever ideas you should be able to come up with. So I think it's a combination of both, as Ross said, and I also feel... I read just a few days ago that Mr Ecclestone was commenting that we should introduce budget cuts into Formula 1, so I think you could say that there's quite a consensus now about doing something further.

EB: I do share the same visions as my colleagues. Using the restriction on the resources and expenditure is one of the best ways, obviously, and we need to adjust a little bit the technical and maybe the sporting regulations to cut some costs and that's going to be much better. We need to keep the Formula 1 philosophy.

LPS: For us, we are maybe the team that has the lowest budget on the grid. It's not going to be easy for us to reduce the budget, no? Even we are trying to reduce our budget more and it's not easy. I'm not sure what we can afford. Maybe we say regulations dictate the budget cut. I don't know.

Ross, before, you were talking of the magic of Formula 1. In the last few days, Flavio Briatore has said that for him, this is a Formula 1 where only cars are now counting. Drivers are not making the difference as they did in the past. They don't have that big a personality. Do you agree with that?

RB: I think there is a good equilibrium to try and achieve. If the car starts to become a totally prevalent factor then we don't want that. Equally, as I say, we want a situation where if there's a great driver in not such a great car then he will struggle a bit. You've always got two drivers in the same team, so there's a competition going on there as well, so if there is a very good car, then you've still got two drivers within that team. There's very few poor drivers that have won World Championships so I think that tells us that the great drivers win the World Championships. Getting an equilibrium is something that we should be mindful of. But I think that at the other end of the scale is let's have GP1: standard cars, all that sort of stuff - and I think we would be shocked how quickly we would lose interest in Formula 1 if we did that.

I would like to return very briefly to the letter. The four team principles here, did you sign the letter please? It's a very simple question.

RB: Yes, we signed the letter.

AP: Do you think I wouldn't sign a letter to do with cost control?

RB: The teams asked the FIA to continue the process of looking at cost control. It's something which the FIA are very keen to do as well, so it was a letter of support to the FIA to say that we want to continue the process of reducing costs and look at fair ways of introducing the regulations or procedures to keep the costs under control and further reduce the costs. If we had a Formula 1 where teams like the smaller teams at the back of the grid could be commercially viable - more commercially viable - then I think that's a healthier Formula 1, so have to find ways of trying to achieve that.

It emerged last week that the Lehman Brothers' stake in Delta Topco has to be sold by the middle of 2014. Could you confirm whether or not you are interested either individually or as a group in purchasing that 15.3% stake, per team or by FOTA or however you can guys can get a better slice of the F1 pie?

RB: Individually as in me personally or...? It's certainly not something we've considered.

EB: It's not something that has been considered.

Yesterday, I asked the drivers - now you - that since 1996 Melbourne has been on the calendar, do you think it is important to keep it in F1 and should it be changed to a night race after 2015?

EB: I think this year the schedule is a little bit later than in previous years, and there are still around 300,000 people attending the weekend so I would say why not?

RB: We very much enjoy being here. It's a great race, the huge enthusiasm from the city and from the fans. It's a really enjoyable race, so we have to find a way of moving forward and trying to keep the race and finding solutions. If the solution is a night race, then we have to find a way of achieving that but personally - and I think as a team - we would be very disappointed if we couldn't continue racing in Australia. It's a great place to start the season.

AP: I was in Western Australia over the last few days and interestingly, WA suffered a 20percent decline in tourism in 2011 whereas Victoria's tourism has grown, and I think the state has a tremendous record of attracting great events and there's no doubt that that puts Melbourne on the map around the world. If having a night race meant more excitement, more publicity, a bigger global audience for the race here, then I think it's something that the state should very seriously consider. As Ross said, whatever happens, we really want to come back, because it is a fantastic weekend, really fantastic.

PH: I agree with the comments made. They've put a lot of effort into creating an event for the fans. If you walk around the infield, there's a lot of activity going on and if anybody follows motor sport in Australia, that's something that they do very well. There are other events like the Clipsall which is an amazing event, if you ever get the chance to go there over in Adelaide I recommend that you do so. So I think yeah, as long as it's viable for the promoter and they can make it work and it seems that the fans seem to like it then I think everyone's very happy to be here.

LPS: I've been driving in Adelaide which was a nice track and now here where I drove in the Lamborghini Trophy in 1999, fantastic track, the fans and everything, for us to come here is a nice place to come.

Adam touched on Bernie's comments on the budget cap a few minutes ago. I'm just wondering how much consensus there is among the teams to bring it in. Is it a viable option at the moment, and what has changed from a couple of years ago when the vast majority of the teams refused to go with the budget cap option?

AP: I think, to be specific, Mr Ecclestone's comments were about budget capping. The teams have agreed a different process: the Resource Restriction Agreement and the Singapore Agreement. I'm not suggesting that we should change the overall structure at this point. I think there is, however, a very high degree of consensus amongst everybody - the FIA, Formula 1 and the teams - that we should continue to reduce costs.

Luis, how confident are you that you've got the money to reach the end of the season?

LPS: I'm confident to reach the end of the season, I'm confident of the money. It's secure.

Ross, with the FIA saying that your F-duct system is legal, how long do you think it will take the other teams to copy the same solutions and do you think that this could be an advantage that you could carry on for a while as was the case of the Brawn with the double diffuser?

RB: Innovation is the lifeblood of Formula 1 racing, I've oversold that point already. Obviously I'm not going to go into detail of what people are calling the F-duct. I'm surprised they are calling it that, because I don't quite know what that means. We have an interesting system on the car and it's not complicated at all, so I'm sure other teams are looking at it and they need to decide if it's worthwhile or not. But it's not in the same magnitude as the diffuser concept that we had or even the exhaust concepts the cars ran the last few years. It's obviously helpful, that's why we're doing it but it's not a massive performance gain.

AP: That's a relief to hear, so we can stop developing ours.

RB: I would like you to spend all your money on it, Adam, and then we can get on with other stuff.

AP: It wouldn't take long!

F1 Australian Grand Prix – FP3 report

It was the beach of champions. Or should that be kitty litter?

While FP3 is traditionally pretty staid, thanks to the limited running time and number of cars on track, this afternoon saw not one but two German multiple world champions bin it in the kitty litter, scooping up gravel like their lives depended on it.

Track conditions at Albert Park were vastly improved for the final practice session of the Australian Grand Prix weekend, but heavy rain yesterday meant that the track was pretty green, despite the best efforts of the support categories to lay down rubber.

Sebastian Vettel and Michael Schumacher learned that to their cost this afternoon, with both drivers - who are hardly short of talent - hitting the gravel in the run-off area and bringing out the yellow flags.

Schumacher's accident came when the German elder statesman was top of the timesheets, and shortly after he had radioed the team to inform them that the Silver Arrows' DRS was "too aggressive". Vettel, on the other hand, was pushing too hard in an attempt to claim the top slot that was his by rights last season.

Neither car suffered significant damage as a result of their trips to the beach of champions, and it's only to be expected that Vettel will find some extra pace with which to impress in qualifying.

Lewis Hamilton was top of the timesheets in the first dry session of the weekend, leading from Romain Grosjean by a hair's breadth.

The Lotus looked strong throughout winter testing (when it was running, that is...) and its presence near the top of the timesheets in FP3 should lead to an interesting qualifying session with at least eight cars seriously in the mix.

But even more enticingly, the top 13 drivers were split by just over a second, meaning that we've got a tightly packed field at the front and in the mid-field. It looks as though predictions of a close-fought season were right on the money.

FP3 times (unofficial)

1. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.25.681s [18 laps]

2. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.25.758s [21 laps]
 3. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.25.900s [20 laps]
 4. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.25.906s [17 laps]
 5. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.25.929s [23 laps]
 6. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.26.078s [14 laps]
 7. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.26.211s [12 laps]
 8. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.26.470s [17 laps]
 9. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.26.632s [20 laps]
 10. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.26.723s [17 laps]
 11. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.26.733s [15 laps]
 12. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.26.737s [19 laps]
 13. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.26.755s [21 laps]
 14. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.27.029s [23 laps]
 15. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.27.119s [20 laps]
 16. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.27.323s [19 laps]
 17. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.27.428s [22 laps]
 18. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.28.023s [19 laps]
 19. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.28.341s [19 laps]
 20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.28.702s [11 laps]
 21. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.30.728s [13 laps]
 22. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.31.225s [14 laps]
 23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.33.114 [12 laps]
 24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.33.261s [13 laps]
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F1 Australian Grand Prix – Q1 report

As the pitlane opened for Q1 in Albert Park, the track temperature had dropped to 28 degrees, while air temperature was down to 19 degrees.

A day of sunshine saw the track drier than it's been all weekend, although some of the precious F1 rubber laid down in FP3 was cleaned off by the marshalls following something of a pile-up in the afternoon's V8 supercar race.

With everyone hoping that 2012 qualifying will be less predictable than 2011, there are still serious question marks over HRT – no one is confident that they will make it through qualifying. The 107 percent rule will be enforced this season, and neither Pedro de la Rosa and Narain Karthikeyan have been able to compete with Marussia for pace.

Sebastian Vettel suffered the indignity of a trip through the gravel in FP3, and the German driver's initial laps in Q1 had something of a ragged edge to them – everyone is looking at Mercedes as a serious threat this year, and the defending world champion appears to be feeling the pressure more than most.

Lewis Hamilton started his session with a trip across the grass; the McLaren driver should be able to make it into Q2 on the damaged rubber, but will need a replacement set of tyres if he hopes to fight for pole in the final session. Despite the off, however, Hamilton was able to hold onto a temporary P2 in the standings.

Michael Schumacher was another man to take a brief trip across the grass early on in Q1; the German elder statesman of the sport is a hot tip for a surprise pole this afternoon, given his commanding performances yesterday.

Fernando Alonso had a flying lap ruined by Karthikeyan as he approached the finish line; as both drivers were setting fliers it was the job of the Ferrari to get past, not the HRT's job to move over. Even once the pair had crossed the line, Alonso had difficulty passing the HRT – not a scenario anticipated by anyone, least of all the Spanish racing outfit.

But on his next trip round the park, Alonso found the pace for which he is famous (despite the equipment), and managed a provisional P7, good enough to see him through to Q2.

With five minutes remaining of the session, both HRT drivers are outside the 107 percent zone and look unlikely to be racing tomorrow. After four laps Karthikeyan is nearly 13 seconds off the pace, while de la Rosa is nearly seven seconds slower than Nico Rosberg in P1, and six-tenths outside the 107 percent time.

After a shaky start to the session, Vettel popped up in P2 with a couple of minutes remaining.

As is always the case in the closing minutes of a qualifying session, times on the board changed too rapidly to track as the chequered flag drew nearer. A widescale switch to the softer compound saw timesheet-topping times from Sauber and Force India, while Alonso made up for his earlier struggles with a spell in P4.

Dropout zone

18. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus)
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham)
20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
21. Timo Glock (Marussia)
22. Charles Pic (Marussia)

Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) DNQ*
Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) DNQ*

* Pending FIA confirmation.

F1 Australian Grand Prix – Q2 report

The big surprise of Q1 was the departure of Kimi Raikkonen. Lotus had taken the gamble of sending the Finnish world champion out on the harder tyre, and it was a gamble that didn't pay off.

After nearly binning it in the wall towards the end of the session, Raikkonen was the man who joined the three not-so-new-anymore teams as the back of the pack in qualifying.

Initial runs in Q2 all started on used option tyres, with teams testing the water on a rapidly improving track.

Sebastian Vettel, who looked rather ragged at the start of qualifying, looks to be back in his comfort zone. The defending world champion crossed the line in P1 on his first Q2 timed run, a scenario we're all accustomed to.

But the drama of the session came via the Ferrari of Fernando Alonso: the Spanish driver brought out the red flags approximately half-way through Q2 when the F2012 skidded backwards into the kitty litter at Turn 1.

What looked initially to have been driver error appeared on replay to be caused by a problem with the car. The accident was too sudden to be driver error when the driver in question has Alonso's innate ability behind the wheel. With the session back underway, the hopes of the Scuderia rest on Felipe Massa's shoulders.

With the track reopened for running, Albert Park belonged to the Mercedes engines – Nico Rosberg and Michael Schumacher took provisional P1 and P2 (in Q2), while Lewis Hamilton and Jenson Button filled the next two slots on the timesheets with their own Merc-powered cars.

Jean-Eric Vergne, Kamui Kobayashi, and Sergio Perez waited until the last possible moment to head out on track for their own timed runs, and it doesn't look like the gamble has paid off for the Sauber pair. With only seconds remaining all three of the gamblers have one last chance to make it through, but Perez elects to return to the pits and will start in P17.

Perez wasn't able to set a time in Q2, while Vergne and Kobayashi join the Ferrari pair, Bruno Senna, and Paul di Resta in the dropout zone.

Dropout zone

11. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso)
 12. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
 13. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
 14. Bruno Senna (Williams)
 15. Paul di Resta (Force India)
 16. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
 17. Sergio Perez (Sauber)
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F1 Australian Grand Prix – Q3 report

With both Ferraris out in Q2, and the pace set by Mercedes, Q3 at Albert Park is looking to be more exciting than any of the sessions we saw in 2011.

Lewis Hamilton took provision pole on his first lap, but with more than half the session remaining every time is little more than provisional at this point. The Mercedes engines are looking very strong, however, with three of the four fastest cars being powered by the boys from Brixworth.

Sebastian Vettel doesn't want to make it too easy for them, however – the Red Bull driver managed P2 on his first lap, and was only seven-tenths down on the McLaren. But for the Red Bull to be any tenths down on another car is not a scenario anyone would have predicted at the end of last season.

With only two minutes remaining of Q3, all ten cars pour onto the track.

Hamilton is the only man to set a lap in the 1m24s range, and it looks like the McLaren driver might be able to hold onto provisional pole. His strongest competition at the moment comes in the form of teammate Jenson Button, who was within a millisecond of besting the 2008 champion.

But Button wasn't able to make it stick, and Hamilton was able to hold onto P1 despite the best efforts of the competition. Particularly impressive was Romain Grosjean, who managed a P3 grid position with a 1.25.302s lap on his debut for Lotus.

Mercedes' much-celebrated magic wing was good enough for a second-row start for Michael Schumacher, but the surprise pole many were hoping for is still out of reach. Nico Rosberg will be starting tomorrow's race from P7, a grid position the Mercedes driver was very familiar with last season.

Vettel was probably the surprise of the session – instead of the run of poles we saw last season, the defending champion is back in the third row,

alongside teammate Mark Webber. The Australian driver has bested the German in qualifying for the first time in many moons, but Albert Park has given Red Bull their worst qualifying session in years.

Provisional grid

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

Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) DNQ*

Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) DNQ*

* Pending FIA confirmation.

F1 Australian Grand Prix – Saturday press conference

It's a new year, a new season, and to celebrate we had a new face at the post-qualifying press conference.

Present were Lewis Hamilton (McLaren), Jenson Button (McLaren), and Romain Grosjean (Lotus).

Lewis, a fantastic lap, clearly, and what a great way to start a new season.

Lewis HAMILTON: Yes, it's an incredible feeling to be back here and to get off to such a good start. I think this is mine and Jenson's first one-two – I believe at least – in qualifying, so it's fantastic to start the season this way. I'm massively proud of the team, working incredibly hard as every year they do, but just to see that it's never-give-up and this is the result of that.

Jenson, very close between the two of you, just over a tenth of a second, but this tells us it's going to be quite a competitive season.

Jenson BUTTON: It does. I think, first of all, congratulations to Lewis and the whole team. I think we have done a very good job this winter and I think we have proved that today. It is only the beginning and obviously the lights haven't gone out yet but this is a great first result for us on a Saturday and yeah, it's looking like it's going to be a very exciting season. We were so close through all the qualifying sessions but Lewis had the upper hand. I tried my best but it wasn't quite enough.

Romain, welcome back to Formula One and a fantastic performance for you. Third on the grid: what does this say about you and the Lotus F1 team?

Romain GROSJEAN: Well, fantastic job from everybody. It's really nice to be back in Formula One and I enjoyed the time. Winter testing went pretty well and today I'm very proud to be part of this experience with Lotus. I think a few people believed in me the first time and today I'm back, well, almost to the top, and I'm very proud to be with those guys here and hope we can keep going that way all season long and then it will be a very nice story.

Back to you Lewis, a tough race obviously always here at Albert Park. What are going to be the keys to tomorrow's race and do you expect more of a threat in the race, from Mercedes and Red Bull in particular?

LH: I think it's going to be incredibly tough, a very intense race. Obviously, looking after the tyres is going to be key as it always is and getting off to a good start, seeing what the strategies are like, and obviously the safety car is at all times a thing. The team need to be on point and so do me and Jenson, so we'll make sure we do that.

Lewis, that's got to be a good start?

LH: Yeah, it's a fantastic feeling. It's great to be back here and it's just an incredible start to the season. But of course, tomorrow's the important day and we have a lot to look forward to. But just a tremendous job from the team to get us to this point. We've had a couple of tough years but just never seemed to give up. It's just good to be here, as I said.

And yesterday you said how you were focused on dry running, knowing that the weather was going to be better for the next two

days and that's paid off I guess?

LH: To some extent, yeah. There was no disadvantage or advantage for me going into the wet yesterday but it was just to focus on the dry set up and get that as close to perfection as I could. My lap was a good lap, obviously. The second time I tried to brake 10 metres later at turn one, but it didn't work. But fortunately, my first lap was good enough.

It was particularly good in sector three: you were half a second faster than anyone else apart from Mark Webber there. Was that something you were concentrating on?

LH: Yeah, that's something I focused on for a lot of the run. On one of the runs I got held up by Michael, but otherwise I was just trying to improve in that sector because all the others were OK. But there's always time you can find everywhere. Jenson did a fantastic job, he was very, very closely behind me. As always, keeping me on my toes.

Jenson, a two-time winner here. What are your thoughts about tomorrow?

JB: First of all, I'm going to echo what Lewis said: the team have done a fantastic job this winter. We knew that we had to have a good winter. It was something we were lacking the previous two years and we definitely did have that. Very happy to be here, in top three or the top two, on the front row, and hopefully we can race well from here tomorrow. I was actually a bit surprised by the gap back to the Red Bulls and some of the other teams but, yeah, we'll definitely take that. The last two days have been good for us, just chipping away at the car and finding little bits here and there and it's been a good couple of days and good start to the season.

What have you learned about the tyres here that is going to make a big difference in the race itself – concentrating on the softer tyre perhaps?

JB: I ran on the soft tyres yesterday. I think a lot of people ran the harder tyre, the medium, but I ran on the soft and it worked pretty well. I was quite surprised by the consistency of the tyre. I think we found that when we came here last year after winter testing, the tyres weren't lasting very long but we came here and it was a circuit where we had very good degradation – some cars even one-stopped. I don't think it's going to be one of those tough races where degradation is a massive issue. I think that'll be more next weekend.

Romain, it's not a dream. You're OK. You don't have to pinch yourself. A fantastic debut here. Absolutely extraordinary. What are your thoughts?

RG: Well, I think: never give up. That's the lesson. Today, I'm very happy to be here, very proud as well to be here. A few people believed in me at the toughest time and today I think they were with me in the car. I'm proud to be part of the Lotus team and the atmosphere and the experience can be very good and I think. We have been working pretty well during the winter, trying to do our best. As I said, I'm very happy to be with this team and I think they are working very hard for us and we are trying to make the best of everything we can. It's not a dream: we did it. We can be proud of it and tomorrow we'll keep working to improve ourselves, trying to get the best result as possible during the race and then in the next races as well.

Where do you think the car has been particularly good around here?

RG: I think it's a little bit everywhere. I think sector three. I think a little bit myself coming as well. I'm discovering the track, this morning in completely dry conditions. I think the car is pretty good everywhere. We are trying to improve it every time and if we can manage to bring some more pieces every race maybe we can in between these two guys or maybe at the front. That would be the goal.

A lot of people would say that you've had a pretty tough learning curve here at this circuit. It was wet yesterday and yet here you are third on the grid. Do you always learn circuits really quickly?

RG: Normally yes, I do learn quickly but I think when we get everything at the factory I think it's even easier. My engineer did a fantastic job for me, he's trying to help me as much as he can and Formula One is tough, I have many things to think about and to do, during a qualifying lap and in the race and everything – but it went pretty well and I think there is some more to come.

Question to all of you: have you been surprised by the lack of pace of the Red Bull? And a special one for Lewis: your first start in 2007 was a little bit tricky. Do you have advice for Romain?

LH: Tough one. I think we're all probably surprised... I myself always thought that the Lotus was going to be quick this weekend which they are and of course, I'm surprised that we are so fast. I knew that we would be competitive this weekend but I didn't really know what to expect, in terms of how close people would be, but I'm pleasantly surprised. As for Grosjean, he knows what to do. He's got great experience and I'm sure tomorrow he will do his utmost best.

JB: I think everybody's answered that one already. I think we did a very good job of getting the best out of ourselves this weekend. I think we haven't really made any mistakes. I don't know what Red Bull have been up to. Sebastian obviously took a trip into the gravel this morning, which wouldn't have helped their preparations. But Red Bull haven't lost it. They're still going to be competitive and we can never forget that but at the moment, we're going to enjoy this moment and go out tomorrow and hopefully have a great race.

RG: It's great but I'm sure Red Bull will work very hard and come back quickly, but we have to improve ourselves every time and we have seen that some teams are better than others. We didn't know too much what to expect about the winter testing and after this morning. I was more confident than my engineer before qualifying. 'Ah, it should be fine,' but at the end, we are here and they will back for sure. We have to keep fighting and not resting.

Lewis, you just said that you expected the Renault to be quick. I wondered if either you or Jenson had got close enough to Romain and the Lotus, either in testing or here, to know where it is strong?

LH: There wasn't a time during testing that I was ever behind either of them, so I have no idea where they are quick, but they are clearly very very fast and have great downforce. Were you?

JB: Maybe, but I don't know. My memory is not that good.

RG: Everybody is trying to avoid everybody in testing.

Lewis, 20th pole of your career, I don't know if you remember them all, but how does this one compare to some of the others, in particular, given the turbulent 2011 you endured last season?

LH: Yeah, I still can't believe that I've had so many pole positions. For me, every one has been special and particularly this one. To come straight into the season and start off so well through qualifying – we've still got a day ahead of us – but it's a fantastic feeling and of course, with the tough couple of years past, it's definitely good a way to start off on the right foot.

Lewis and Jenson, you've both won this race in the year when you won the championship, are such statistics important or not important? What do you have to do tomorrow to win the race?

JB: Beat these guys. I don't know what to expect. We can go through as many simulations as we want and the opinions of the race that we want. All I know is that we have made the race a little bit easier for ourselves compared to the Red Bulls. Last year it was the other way around and it was more of a difficult race because they were starting on the front row, but this year it's the other way around. I'm happy with where we are, but tomorrow is again a very different day. We will stay positive. Obviously we're doing everything and doing everything right and making sure that we don't make mistakes overnight and get the right balance for tomorrow in the race.

To all of you: we saw a beautiful battle between McLaren, Lotus, Mercedes and Red Bull here in qualifying. Do you think this is the picture of the championship or is it a particularity of the track?

JB: I think those are the four teams that after testing... you didn't know which order they were in but those were the four teams that you would say were putting in good laps in testing, so yes, I think we expected those four teams but you never know the gap between those teams and as you said, through qualifying, in Q1, Q2, Q3, it was all mixed up. It's good to see; good that we ended up near the front in the important one.

The first race is normally the one with the most question marks. Yesterday you had little running the dry, today it was just one practice session. Was it enough to answer all the questions for the race, Lewis or Jenson?

LH: We could always do with more time on the track and more running, but I think everyone is in the same boat generally. So we have to really rely on the data and the information that we got on the tyres in our long runs in the winter testing and at Barcelona in particular. Hopefully that will put us in good stead for tomorrow, but it's going to be an interesting race for sure. Don't know what these tyres are going to do but they don't seem too bad.

Romain, how does it feel to lead 1-0 against Kimi after the first qualifying (session)?

RG: Well, you know when you start qualifying you're fighting against 23 other guys and everybody starts qualifying thinking he will fight for pole position and to achieve that you have to beat everybody.

F1 Australian Grand Prix – Race report

The 2012 Formula 1 season got off to a bang in Melbourne's Albert Park on Sunday afternoon, although for some drivers that bang was a little too literal.

A reduced grid of 22 cars lined up for the Australian Grand Prix, when HRT drivers Pedro de la Rosa and Narain Karthikeyan failed to qualify for the race itself. And the small field grew ever smaller by the lap, resulting in a race of attrition in which only 13 cars took the chequered flag.

First man out was Nico Hulkenberg, who made contact with Bruno Senna on the first corner of the first lap and limped back to the pits. The Force India driver was hit from behind, and suffered the double whammy of a puncture and damaged rear suspension, ending his race in the process.

The next to fall was Romain Grosjean, whose P3 grid position was supposed to be the antidote to teammate Kimi Raikkonen's poor qualifying. Grosjean was overtaken off the start by both Mercedes drivers and Sebastian Vettel, putting the Lotus driver in the unenviable position of being in Pastor Maldonado's sights on the second lap.

Maldonado widened his line mid-way through Turn 13, clipping Grosjean's right front wheel in the process. The E20 shot across the gravel with broken steering, ending the Frenchman's first post-return outing on lap 2.

With Hulkenberg and Grosjean out, the retirements calmed down until lap 10, when Michael Schumacher was sidelined with a gearbox problem. It was a disappointing result for Mercedes, who saw both Schumacher and teammate Nico Rosberg make up positions off the start.

Caterham's Vitaly Petrov was the next man out. The Russian racer brought out the only Safety Car of the afternoon when he stopped his car on the pit straight on lap 34 thanks to a power steering issue. The Anglo-Malaysian racing team also saw the retirement of Heikki Kovalainen on lap 38; the Finnish driver felt his car start to pull left under the Safety Car, and a quick investigation in the pits revealed that the problem was an issue with his front left suspension.

The last non-classified finisher was Felipe Massa, whose race ended following a lap 46 collision with countryman Bruno Senna. While the stewards announced that the pair's crash would be investigated following the race, the consensus was that it was a racing incident caused by the lack of available space on track as Senna and Massa were being passed by a Toro Rosso heading into Turn 4. While not inevitable, the collision was difficult to avoid.

Senna also retired as a result of the accident, although the Williams driver was able to continue for an additional six laps before the team decided to bring an early end to the Brazilian's day thanks to an over-heating engine. Debris from the accident with Massa had entered the sidepods, and Williams were loath to risk an engine failure at the first race of the season.

The next man to retire as a classified finisher was Marussia's Charles Pic. The Frenchman suffered an oil pressure leak in the closing laps of the race, and was called into the garage by the team ahead of the chequered flag.

Pastor Maldonado was the final classified retiree, and the end to the Williams driver's race was the most spectacular finish of the afternoon. Pushing to catch-up with Fernando Alonso in P5, the Venezuelan driver lost control on the final lap, crashed into the wall, and briefly took to the air.

With nine drivers gone and two who didn't start it was left to the final thirteen drivers to put on a show for the watching crowds. And what a show it was.

Fernando Alonso proved yet again that his skills as a driver far outstrip any car he is given – the Ferrari driver finished Sunday's race in P5 despite

being behind the wheel of a car the press pack have taken to calling Clifford, after the Big Red Dog found in children's books.

But when it comes to the real hero of the hour, it's a close call between race winner Jenson Button, who didn't put a foot wrong for McLaren, and Sergio Perez, who started the race from P22 and one-stopped his way to a P8 finish.

Button got a better start than pole-sitter and teammate Lewis Hamilton, and took advantage of his pace to secure the ideal line into Turn 1 before heading off into the distance in a manner reminiscent of Sebastian Vettel in 2011. The Briton had worked out a commanding 10-second lead before the Safety Car did away with his cushion, but Button was able to control the pace of the pack at the restart and hold onto his place at the front.

Perez, meanwhile, had a much more eventful race. The Sauber driver made up ten places in the first few laps before making contact with teammate Kamui Kobayashi and damaging his front wing. The only weak spot in the Mexican's performance came when he made the understandable decision to back off in an attempt to avoid the debris from Maldonado's accident; expert racer Kimi Raikkonen took advantage and got past the Sauber for P7.

2012 F1 Grand Prix results (unofficial)

1. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1:34.09.565s
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1:34.11.704s
3. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1:34.13.640s
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1:34.14.112s
5. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1:34.31.130s
6. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1:34.46.331s
7. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1:34.47.579s
8. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1:34.49.023s
9. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1:34.49.121s
10. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1:34.49.302s
11. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1:34.49.413s
12. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1:35.07.207s
13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) DNF
14. Timo Glock (Marussia) + 1 lap
15. Charles Pic (Marussia) DNF
16. Bruno Senna (Williams) DNF

Felipe Massa (Ferrari) RET
Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) RET
Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) RET
Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) RET
Romain Grosjean (Lotus) RET
Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) RET

F1 Australian Grand Prix – Sunday press conference

What a start to the season! An absolute blinder of a race, with chaos on the last lap and the first – never mind the 56 laps in the middle – was followed by the official FIA press conference.

Present were Jenson Button (McLaren), Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), and Lewis Hamilton (McLaren).

Jenson you took the lead at the start, controlled the race, sum up your emotions?

Jenson **BUTTON**: I think, as we all know sat here, every win means a lot to you, and for us as a team it really shows how important the winter is. We've had a strong winter – yesterday's qualifying really showed that – so it's nice to come away with a victory today (at the) first race of the new season. The guys back at Woking have done an amazing job this winter. This will definitely help them to push harder into the extra hours in the morning when they're making that extra little part. So, big thank you to everyone at Woking and the whole of the Vodafone McLaren Mercedes team for this victory here in Melbourne.

Sebastian, sixth on the grid, unaccustomed for you, but second at the end, which is a bit more normal. The Safety Car did the trick for you to get past Lewis with 20 laps to go.

Sebastian **VETTEL**: Yeah, nevertheless I think we would have had a good shot at him because it was very close and I was quite quick and I decided to stay out and he went to the pits so I think we would have had a crack even without the Safety Car, it would have been very close but surely it did help a little bit. Nevertheless, I think it was a great race. Quite a lot of fun. A good start initially but then I was surprised by Nico. He had a very good start. I got a bit stuck at the inside, I didn't really have an option on where to go and he got past and then I had two Mercedes ahead. I got past Nico very quickly – which was a great manoeuvre, on edge. And then I was behind Michael where I had a mistake, went off in the first corner and then he decided to do exactly the same the next time I got close to him. That was good. And then, obviously, catching up the McLarens. I think all in all, congratulations to McLaren and to Jenson, he drove a fantastic race and was unbeatable today but I'm very happy to come away with second, it's a lot of points. I think a lot of people would not have expected that after the result of yesterday. I think we had a better car in the race and the car seems to have a lot of potential and it's up to us to get to it. Then we should be very close to these guys but I think it was a great day and thanks to everyone for pushing so hard and making the race result today possible.

Lewis, you look dejected. It wasn't your day today, was it?

Lewis **HAMILTON**: No. First of all, congratulation to Jenson he did a fantastic job and congratulations to the team for doing a great job over the winter. Yeah it as just a bit of a tough day but we have plenty of races ahead so I just have to keep my head down.

Back to you Jenson: how did you feel when the Safety Car came out? You had built up a 10-second cushion. Did you think 'uh-oh, I'm in trouble here'?

JB: Yeah, you always do, especially when it's so cold. It's late in the afternoon, the sun's dropping, it's difficult to keep heat in the tyres. That's the last thing you want leading the pack round to the restart. I was a little bit on edge but I was able to keep heat in the tyres, save a lot of fuel, which I think was quite important for us, and get a good restart. The team said push as hard as you can for two laps after the restart to get a gap. I was able to do that which I was very happy about. And then it was about controlling the pace until the end of the race. Yeah, it was a pretty amazing day.

Sebastian, from your side when the Safety Car came out? Your feelings and how quickly were you made to make that decision?

SV: We decided to stay out when Lewis came in, then the Safety Car came out. I'm not sure, maybe it helped us a little bit to get past Lewis. We had a great stop so I think that was the most important thing. And then when the Safety Car came, yeah, I thought I would be in a good place or a good position to have a go at Jenson... but I didn't! He was just too quick. Two corners and he seemed to be gone and I was struggling to get up to speed. I think I held up Lewis, he was a couple of laps very close with the DRS enabled, so it wasn't very easy to get away from him but Jenson was out of sight. So there was no way we could have stayed with him. He completely deserved to win today.

Lewis, your feelings when you saw the back of that Red Bull in front of you having taken your second place? You had a go to try and get it back again in the final stages?

LH: Yeah, very similar to the position I was in last year. It was quite a tough race but it was still quite positive for the team to come here with good pace and so hopefully we can take that on to the next race.

Jenson, we go next to Malaysia. You'll be looking for another win there I'm sure. Stiff competition though, we in for a competitive season clearly. How are you feeling after this first race?

JB: We all think this year is a very special year in Formula One. Last year was also, having five world champions but having six world champions and so many competitive teams – it's good to see Formula One is in a great place right now. It's a great sport to be a part of right now. Very excited heading to Malaysia but I'm not thinking about that right now. I'm going to enjoy myself with the team this afternoon/evening, with my friends and family. Then tomorrow I'll turn my attention to Malaysia.

Jenson, your third win here, this place must be getting a bit special for you?

JB: Yeah. And I've actually stayed in the same bedroom those three years. We arrived this year and my missus said 'we're actually in the same bedroom when you won those two previous years' – so maybe that's the reason why.

SV: Next year you get a different one...

JB: yeah, whatever... but every race you win, as we all know here, is very special but I think starting the year strong for this team is really important and the last two years for us have been tricky coming into the first race, so to come away with Lewis' pole yesterday and the victory today, I think puts us in a great position for the next few races and on the right foot. Big thank you to everyone within the team who's worked so hard. I saw our mechanics this morning who said 'this curfew's great – it's the first rest we've had since the start of the year', so big thanks to all of them and everyone at Woking that's worked those extra hours to get these extra parts out and... yeah. Fantastic day.

You seemed to pull away progressively at the start of the race, then got a margin and then that margin seemed to stabilise. What was it like at the start of the race?

JB: The first few laps I knew I had to push hard. I knew that Lewis would be right on my tail and I obviously had to try to get away because of the DRS after lap two, so that was important. But I think we're all going into a bit of the unknown in the race. The longest run I did was about eight laps on Friday – and obviously the conditions were very different. So, going into the race, trying to understand what wing angle to use, tyre pressure and everything was very tricky. I think we got it close but it wasn't quite right but the second and third runs for me were much better. We had more of an understanding of what the car felt like in the first stint and the second and third ones were much stronger. All in all I'm happy with the car, there were a few areas where I think it could have been a little bit better – but I think we did a pretty damn good job this weekend.

And the difference in tyres for you.

JB: Yeah, there is a difference and it's a difference in balance more than anything else. The biggest worry was the safety car. When you've pulled a ten second gap, or you've got a ten second gap it's a great place to be. You can control it to some extent but as soon as the safety car comes out and it's six o'clock in the evening, it's difficult to keep temperature in those tyres and we found that last year and the year before, so that was a big worry for me. We all try to keep as much temperature in the tyres but when you actually push, it's a very different feeling and it's very easy to lock-up and grab a tyre. That didn't happen, I was able to pull a good gap again in order to get out of the DRS zone and then try to control the pace – but Seb put in some pretty quick laps in the end and I had to just put a couple in just to keep the gap – but we did it in the end.

Sebastian, for you, you had quite a few battles, not just with Lewis at the end but also with Michael. It was quite a lively race for you.

SV: Yeah, the start was surely pretty interesting, so I enjoyed that. I think I had a good start first off, getting off the line was important. Then it's a bit tricky here because Turn One is quite difficult to find the right point to hit the brakes. But I was quite surprised when Nico all of a sudden arrived from the outside. I think I got a bit stuck. Surely you don't, y'know, want to leave the door open at the inside, he used the opportunity and, yeah, great start for him. Nevertheless I think I was happy with how the first two corners went and from there I felt pretty quickly that yeah, McLarens are pulling away, bye-bye, and I had to make sure that we are not losing too much ground. I felt that we were quicker than the Mercedes. I got past Nico fairly early, which was important, and then with Michael I did a mistake going into the first corner. I was a bit surprised, obviously I was in the DRS and I arrived a fair bit quicker than the lap before which caught me out. Fortunately I kept the position against Nico, and then had another go at Michael and, yeah, he was very kind, he did exactly the same mistake I did a couple of laps earlier, so that was good. Then it was quite surprising to see how we were able to catch Lewis in a way. I think the second stints were fairly, yeah we had the same pace: Lewis was a bit quicker in the beginning; I seemed to be a bit quicker at the end just when we lined up for the last round of stops and I decided to stay out when he pitted which I think was the right decision. I think we would have had a little bit of a go anyway, but then the safety car came out. I'm not sure, I think it might have helped us a little bit, anyway we got him at the stop, so great job from the guys at the pitbox, and after that, yeah, obviously I thought I'd have another go at Jenson but yeah, the first two or three corners after the restart he was already quite far away. I was struggling, at that time I was holding Lewis up a little bit and he [Jenson] was pulling away too much. I think once I got settled the lap times weren't too bad, the speed wasn't too bad but I think overall he was too quick today for the whole race. So, out-of-sight. Nevertheless, I think it was a very positive race for us, we knew it would be a difficult one, so to come away with second and a lot of points is very important and I think the car has a lot of potential. Obviously we would have loved to have been in a better position yesterday but as I said, we did a lot of laps and I think we understood more about the car and, yeah, now we need to address the

problems and make sure that we give them a harder time next week.

Were you happy with the gear ratios because at one time we thought you were hitting the rev limiter?

SV: Yeah, I don't think it's a secret – we were quite aggressive and I was happy with the ratios. Obviously overtaking around here is quite difficult, we know it's difficult even if you have perfect gears for overtaking, so we decided on the best compromise. I think it worked out, to be honest. I think we had good pace in the race and we still got past people so that was good. The only manoeuvre which I think was a bit borderline was when Lewis was just getting past Perez in turn one and then I lined up for turn three and I'm not sure if he saw me.. It was very close to the outside there, so I need to have a word with him, but other than that it was fine.

Lewis, what happened at the start, because it was almost as though when you changed into second or third gear the car seemed to hesitate or bog down?

LH: I'm not really sure what happened but I lost at least too many positions.

And during that first round of pit stops you seemed to lose around five or six seconds? I didn't see how you lost it.

LH: Me neither.

How about the tyres?

LH: I had some degradation on my first set although probably similar to others.

And how hard was Webber pushing at the end?

LH: Yeah, he was very quick. I damaged my tyres behind Sebastian, then I decided to drop back a little bit so I had some clear air but Mark was definitely putting pressure on.

And with DRS and KERS you were unable to get past Sebastian.

LH: Yeah, they were very quick down the straight, so there was no chance of getting past.

Lewis, in the unilateral, Sebastian said if you hadn't lost that place under the safety car he thought he would have been able to have a go at you. Do you agree with that, was your car running perfectly or were your problems going to slow you down at that stage?

LH: I didn't generally have great pace, so he may or may not have got passed me, who knows? It doesn't really matter. He did in the end.

Jenson, three victories in four years, you will probably apply for Australian citizenship, but how different were these victories compared to the two others that you had here in Melbourne?

JB: It's very different to 2010 when there were obviously strange conditions, a wet start and then drying out. Yeah, very different to 2010. Compared to 2009, I was on pole that time but the race...

SV: ... it was too easy for you in 2009

JB: 'Too easy', let's not talk about that, eh? 2009 was good, yeah, but still in the last stint I was struggling in 2009, because the tyres were obviously working very differently but this time, all the way through the stints the car felt good. I think there was a good balance between pace at the start of the stint and pace at the end of the stint. I think I came away feeling that in terms of the balance we had over this weekend and for this race, and the way that we handled the tyres was probably better than any year I've raced here.

Sebastian, we rarely have the chance to see you fighting in the race. Tell us your experience, what did you learn, is it so different than being at the front from the start of the race?

SV: I think generally... to be honest, I don't really understand the question. People already asked yesterday, 'how do you deal with the disaster of sixth place on the grid?' I don't think it was a disaster. They said we were in the shit, then other people behind us, they were at the back of the shit. We didn't have the best day yesterday, maybe that's true, but nevertheless, I think I was quite confident going into the race. I felt I can do better, my eyes were on the front, not looking into the mirrors too much. I think the racing has already been like this last year when you had pit stops and to make the strategy work you had to pass a couple of guys quickly. It was a little bit the same today, obviously, all the time for position, at the beginning of the race, right after the lights went out, so in that regard, it was a bit different maybe to the majority of last year, but it's not as if it's a completely new situation. Most importantly last year, we didn't allow ourselves to get used to it and therefore it was nothing out of the ordinary, today, to start from P6 and we know that, as I said, there's a long race ahead of us and opportunities to fight. My target was to win the race and now I came second, I think the winner totally deserves to win that race, and therefore it was our maximum, and I'm very happy with that.

Jenson, I missed your victory salute: was it the W or was it a V for victory or what?

JB: I tried to think of something new but I just can't beat Seb's finger. We need to talk afterwards.

Do you think Seb might get as sick of seeing that as you were of the crooked finger last year?

JB: Hopefully he will.

SV: What did you do?

JB: I actually did the W with a water bottle in my hand, which didn't really work very well. Yeah, I'm sure we will sometimes see the crooked finger but hopefully not very often this year and we're going to fight as hard as we can to stop that from happening. Always love your questions.

Jenson, if I saw it correctly, you had soft, medium, medium whereas the Red Bull had soft, soft, medium. Does it mean that degradation on a McLaren would have been a little bit higher?

JB: To tell you the truth, I really don't know. Most of the race I was concentrating on Lewis behind me. He was pretty close so I didn't really know what was going on behind in terms of the Red Bulls. I really don't know. That's just the strategy we went for. I don't think it was an issue of degradation, just the idea that we had and the strategy that we thought was best. But again, with very limited running, it's very difficult to come up with the correct strategy. I think it just depends on which tyre you run on Friday, and I ran the soft tyre and thought that was the right way to go.

Sebastian, does this make the McLarens the favourites for this year's championship, or would you say that you guys are neck-and-neck with them?

SV: No, we are not. I think they were stronger this weekend so look at the result yesterday, look at the result today. As I said, Jenson deserved to win,

he was out of reach for us. I'm very happy with second, especially after the difficult day we might have had yesterday but nevertheless, this was race one. I think it was good to finally get back to racing and stop all the talk, to see some results. We always said in winter testing that McLaren looks very strong. They had a very solid winter, no issues with the car. They did a lot of laps every day so we expected them to be strong. Yesterday they did surprise everyone a little bit with their pace in qualifying. Today in the race I think it was looking a bit better for us, but nevertheless, they are the ones to beat at the moment. Yeah, we will see what we get next weekend. If I remember last year, we were pretty dominant here and then qualifying was just a couple of hundredths between Lewis and myself, so we will see what happens next week.
