

Fl Bahrain Grand Prix – Thursday press conference

The Thursday press conference in Bahrain was a studiously apolitical affair, with all and sundry refraining from making more than the obliquest of references to the political situation in the Gulf kingdom.

Present were Timo Glock (Marussia), Romain Grosjean (Lotus), Lewis Hamilton (McLaren), Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham), Felipe Massa (Ferrari), and Nico Rosberg (Mercedes).

Heikki, it's been a difficult start to the season for you. What were you expecting from these first three or four races?

Heikki KOVALAINEN: Well, obviously we're hoping for better finishes. I think we've had some issues pretty much every race, but we're working on them and we're trying to make sure that those kind of troubles that we've had don't happen again. We've done everything we can: everything we could do in this short time to make sure that we have a trouble-free race.

Are you expecting a big step forwards, therefore, for Barcelona?

HK: We have upgrades coming, not only for Barcelona, but all the way through the season. We are still catching up. We have not yet joined the midfield, so we're still targeting that. Obviously everybody's bringing updates, so how much we will be able to make a rapid gain remains to be seen. But I think we're working flat out and strengthening the team in every area to be able to do that.

So, what are your hopes for this weekend then?

HK: Hopefully to have a trouble-free weekend, without any incidents, especially in the race. To have smooth pit stops without any extra incidents. Hopefully we can get everything out of the team and out of the car. Like we've shown in the last couple of race, especially in China, we were able race a few cars for quite a long time in the race. Hopefully we can carry on doing that.

Romain, now 26-years-old, happy birthday! This is a circuit you know well, you've been talking about your GP2 races here and I think you had a 'full house' here if you understand what that means.

Romain GROSJEAN: Yeah, well, it's a circuit I know quite well, from racing in GP2 and testing with Pirelli for the development of the tyres. I think it's a nice circuit, I quite like it and think we can have a good car here. The weather will be, for once, stable, with some decent temperature and hopefully we can have a clear qualifying and a clear race altogether and achieve an even better result than what we had in the previous race.

In China you got the result you were waiting for, or maybe you were hoping for even better?

RG: You always hope for better! In a way what you want to achieve whenever you start the race is to win. That's the goal for every driver on the grid. But China was a good race, I think it was very tight, some good battles and we were showing that we were able to carry through the race with good pace and some good moves and to be able to be gentle with the tyres. That was the key in China and I think that will be the key one more time here.

But this is such a different circuit and the temperatures and conditions are going to be so different.

RG: Yes, but I hate the cold, so I feel better here. The tyre strategy will be different and the tyre usage will be different here as we have these temperatures but as well I don't think we are not going to struggle with warm-up issues or making the work, which will help us to set up the car in a good way.

Timo, obviously the team has been playing catch-up since the start of the season but how do you feel they've been getting on? It seems to be a very steep learning curve.

Timo GLOCK: Yes, absolutely. If you do 200kms of testing before the first race, every lap, every kilometre you do is like a learning process for us at the moment. I'm quite happy with the past races, I think we've closed the gap quite significantly: last qualifying we were three seconds behind: first race we had five and a half seconds, so there's a clear step forward and that's good.

The results seem positive and the car's reliable as well, how far can you go, do you feel?

TG: I hope we can continue like this in terms of improvements but it will be difficult. European season everyone comes with new updates so we just have to work hard and continue the process we're doing at the moment. It would be great to have at every race a step like we had in China, so we have to see what we can do. We have some little parts here, which could improve the car again, so we're looking forward to it. I think we have a good baseline to really catch-up.

Is the big update coming at Barcelona like most people?

TG: Yeah, we're working on it. It's not definite how much we will get out of it but at the moment we're getting new parts every race. If that continues I don't care how big the update is in Barcelona. If you can keep it up through the whole year that's more important.

Lewis, did you expect to be leading the Championship with three third places after three races?

Lewis HAMILTON: Good afternoon everyone, no, definitely not. The target every year I think is to have consistency and sometimes it just doesn't go to plan but this year I think we've been quite fortunate. Finishing on the podium for the first three races has been fantastic for us. Obviously it's very early in the season. In previous seasons you've seen Championship leaders swapping and changing throughout the year so it doesn't really mean too much at the moment.

Do you feel your car is suited to this circuit? I mean it seems that the game has changed this year with less downforce. The tyres

are just so, so important, even more than they have been before – is that the case?

LH: I personally don't think they're much more important than in the past, I think last year we had similar tyre degradation and we had to manage the tyres in a similar way. If you look at the last race the people on a two-stop were slow at the end of the race and people on three stop were overtaking them. It was the same last year – that's how I won the race. This year the tyre window, the working range is slightly narrower than it was last year, which is making it a little more difficult for people to warm-up the tyres in qualifying, for example. It is a little more challenging but it's providing good racing.

And who is your main competitor? Is he [Nico] your main competitor having been the winner of the last race, or your team-mate? It's difficult to say, isn't it?

LH: It is very difficult to say. You know, when you look at qualifying we're competitive there, Mercedes is now the quickest but it's quite close between a lot of the cars, but in the race pace then you look at the Red Bull being very quick, the Mercedes is very quick, we are quick, even Sauber's quick. It's a real mixture at the moment and it's just about trying to stay consistent and trying to maximise every opportunity you have.

Nico, sadly only a few days to enjoy the win from last weekend but very interesting, this is a circuit that you've done very well on in F3, in GP2, made your F1 debut here and had fastest lap – you must be looking forward to this weekend?

Nico ROSBERG: Yeah, for sure. This is a track I really enjoy, I've had some very good memories here but again it's just difficult to know where we're going to be exactly. In Shanghai of course we did very well but previously we did have a few issues in the races, so it's possible it's going to be a bit more difficult here.

You mentioned those issues, which were tyre-related, and yet you seemed to get it absolutely right in China, can it just go back to square one again here? Is that how difficult it is to get it right?

NR: Well at the same time the engineers and everybody have really been making some good progress on the car, setup-wise and things like that. So we're learning very quickly, so it wasn't a coincidence that we were fast in Shanghai. No, we did a good job and got the best out of it – but the situation could be different here with the temperatures and that might prove a little bit more of a challenge but I don't know.

The emphasis more on setup than it used to be?

NR: Tyre management is more of a problem in the races than it used to be. That's definitely the case and that can be influenced with setup and various other things.

Felipe, this has been a good circuit for you in the past: two wins here, three times qualified second. Do you feel that you're on an upward curve now?

Felipe MASSA: Yeah, for sure it's a very nice track. I have had a great time here. I would expect to have a good race here, the best of the season – so far. I'm just looking forward to having a nice race, scoring good points and working now on having a better race all the time.

Did you feel you had made progress in Shanghai?

FM: Yes, definitely, even if the result at the end was not very satisfying for the team, for Fernando or for me, it was a normal race in terms of race pace, in terms of qualifying and everything. Everything was normal. For sure it was a much more different race in Shanghai compared to the first two races.

And will these temperatures, even though they are very different to Shanghai, will they be more suited to the car?

FM: I hope so. For sure it's a different track, very different to Shanghai but in a way, we're still working to improve the car, still working to make the car more competitive and the car here is not very different to the car in Shanghai, so we will see how the behaviour of the car is on this track in qualifying, but also in the race and see if we can do something different, be more competitive than in Shanghai.

Lewis, it seems that you're even stronger as a person than last year. Do you feel that way and if so, do you feel that your challenging season last year has helped you?

LH: I definitely think that the last three years have added to where I am today. I think there have been a lot of lessons learned and a lot of good and bad experiences which of course definitely help you when you have a good car and when you're in a much better position. Yeah, as for all athletes, I think you have to get your mind set in a certain way and there are many things that can affect that. For example, look at Tiger Woods. He's there and sometimes he's not and he's the best out there. It's really a massive mental game which is about trying to get your mind on the right path. But I feel that I'm there or thereabouts at the moment, still working hard.

Romain, you had a very intense race last Sunday in Shanghai. Your personal battle with Maldonado was perhaps even more than intense. Do you personally see it as revenge for Melbourne?

RG: No, it's not revenge. I made a mistake with Mark Webber which is why I had to fight with Pastor Maldonado. I think that the fight was a little bit tight. Honestly, I wish we hadn't touched each other's cars, but at the end, I ended up in front of him and then I could pull away and finish my race at my own pace and even overtook the second Williams to score more points but that's what I was glad of.

Romain, did you have a lot to say to your engineer about your strategy during the race? Is there a lot of communication?

RG: Well, there is a lot of briefing before the race when there is time to go through the strategies. We had two options basically: either two stops or three stops. The question arose during the second stint: either you really want to push and try to go for three stops, or you make your tyres last for the 20 or 25 laps that you need and you just go for two stops. I think our set-up was pretty good and the car was working very well on the prime tyres. The second stint was very good and we had pitted to cover Sebastian Vettel, if not, we could have done more laps in the second stint which would have made the third one even easier, but at the end of the story, my engineers did a good job, they helped me to save the tyres and make them last longer. When you are fighting with other cars, it's always difficult to save them. You have to realise that the race is long and that you still have a few laps to go.

Obviously there's been a lot of media hype in the build-up to this weekend: has it been much of a distraction for you, in terms of your preparations, or have you just been able to block everything out and keep focused?

HK: It hasn't had the slightest influence on my preparation. I've prepared for the Grand Prix, physically and mentally, the same way that I do any other race. That's all I can answer to that question.

RG: Well, we've been preparing for the event as well as we can. As you say, we can't ignore the situation but in another way, I hope the race may

make a clear vision and help the situation and I think the Grand Prix will be nice.

TG: No, we have made the same preparation as all the other races.

LH: They've said it all. The team has just been focusing on preparing ourselves for the best way of trying to get some wins.

NR: No, we have been preparing to the best of my possibilities and the team's also.

FM: Yeah, the same preparation as always. We came here for the sport, that's the best thing to do, it's a sport.

Nico, now that you've tasted the taste of success, do you think it's going to be harder for you to cope if you're not racing... if you're not fighting for the win at every race?

NR: Niki Lauda said right after the race, 'Nico, believe me, the first win is by the far the most difficult and after that it becomes much easier.' So I'll go for that, he should know.

HK: I got a message from Bernie [Ecclestone] after the first race [win] which said that 'now it's downhill', so there's also that option.

Nico, after qualifying in Shanghai you explained the huge gap of half a second by the drop in temperature by a few degrees, that you had changed the set-up between Q2 and Q3 etc etc, but in the race itself, after the first ten laps, the gap was five seconds, so it never reached the same half a second, so how do you explain that? Was that you?

NR: No, definitely not. It was just that everything came together. I was on top of my game for the weekend in qualifying and the race, but also the set-up – the car was working very well still, I think, in qualifying. Even in Shanghai, we were stronger eventually in the race but of course it was enough to win by some margin. All in all, it was a really strong weekend.

F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – F1 report

Friday morning isn't the most thrilling time to be an F1 spectator, and F1 in desert countries is much drier than normal.

Not because of the climate, I hasten to add, but because the combination of infrequently used tracks and the presence of sand means that the bulk of teams spend much of the session waiting for their rivals to get out on track and waste rubber clearing up the circuit.

The last time Sakhir Circuit saw an F1 car do the rounds was in 2010, and the track conditions this morning were as green as they've ever been. By the time the first half hour of F1 had passed, only four timed laps were on the boards.

Whatever the action on track today, the big story in Bahrain continues to be the political situation outside the rarefied bubble of the F1 paddock.

Force India, who were caught up in a protest on Wednesday evening that saw four team members narrowly miss being hit with a Molotov cocktail on their way home from the circuit, appear to have allowed the political situation here to affect their F1 strategy.

The paddock is currently abuzz with rumours that the Silverstone-based team will not run in FP2, as team members have objected to travelling between the circuit and Manama after dark. Should Force India confirm that decision – at the time of writing the team had confirmed that they were considering such a move – then it explains why they chose to run Paul di Resta and Nico Hulkenberg on the option tyres this morning, when all their rivals elected to stick with primes.

As a result, the Force India drivers finished the morning session in an artificially elevated position on the timesheets – nothing we've seen so far this season suggests that they have the pace to be mixing it with McLaren, Mercedes, and Red Bull.

Lewis Hamilton was the fastest man on track this morning, while Sebastian Vettel made short work of adjusting to the 'new' Red Bull. Vettel spent the Chinese weekend running a modified version of the RB8 with the car's original exhaust layout, but the defending world champion has since reverted to the mkII spec that he professed to be unhappy with in Malaysia.

That unhappiness appears to have been short-lived, as the adaptable Vettel was the only man able to run in the 1m33s with Hamilton. Teammate Mark Webber, who has always been happy with the new exhaust layout, was more than six-tenths down on the young German, posting a best time of 1:34.552s.

While little can be read into the times set in a practice session, the form we've seen so far this season is backed up by the timesheets, and suggests that we have a tight battle up front between the McLarens, Red Bulls, Mercedes, and the Lotuses (Loti?), with Sauber and Williams hot on their heels.

F1 times (unofficial)

1. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1:33.572s [11 laps]
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1:33.877s [21 laps]
3. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1:34.150s [26 laps]
4. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1:34.249s [23 laps]
5. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1:34.277s [14 laps]
6. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1:34.344s [26 laps]
7. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1:34.483s [17 laps]
8. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1:34.552s [22 laps]
9. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1:34.609s [18 laps]
10. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1:34.847s [20 laps]
11. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1:35.024s [22 laps]
12. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1:35.268s [25 laps]
13. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1:35.436s [21 laps]
14. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1:35.497s [24 laps]
15. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1:35.719s [19 laps]

16. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.35.929s [24 laps]
 17. Jean - Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.36.195s [20 laps]
 18. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.36.330s [11 laps]
 19. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.36.484s [18 laps]
 20. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.36.591s [20 laps]
 21. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.37.467s [18 laps]
 22. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.38.006s [18 laps]
 23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.38.877s [19 laps]
 24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.39.996s [23 laps]
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F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – FP2 report

It was another dry session – in climate and excitement terms – from the Sakhir Circuit on Friday afternoon.

But off track was another matter entirely, as Force India took the decision not to run either car in FP2. Speaking to the media, deputy team principal Robert Fernley explained that the team took the decision not to run this afternoon having put together a programme that saw the Silverstone-based team complete its data-harvesting in the morning.

Asked whether the move was a political manoeuvre designed to highlight the tensions in this Gulf kingdom, Fernley said that such a theory could not be further from the truth.

On to the runners, none of whom had any incidents of note on track. One of the characteristics of the Sakhir International Circuit is its mammoth run-off areas, which – the joke goes – extend from coast to coast of this small island country. While the effects of those run-off areas on driver safety are to be commended, the lack of gravel traps at this track mean that no mistake goes punished.

As is par for the course at a practice session, little can be read into the times set this afternoon. We have long been aware that McLaren, Mercedes, and Red Bull all have pace this season, and that they are chased by a tightly-knit pack comprised of Ferrari, Sauber, and Lotus.

Nothing we have seen in Bahrain today alters that impression, although it must be said that the strong winds on offer this afternoon appeared to affect McLaren more than they did any of the British team's rivals.

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.32.816s [35 laps]
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.33.262s [26 laps]
3. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.33.525s [28 laps]
4. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.33.747s [36 laps]
5. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.33.862s [32 laps]
6. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.34.246s [28 laps]
7. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.34.411s [34 laps]
8. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.34.449s [31 laps]
9. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.34.615s [32 laps]
10. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.34.893s [34 laps]
11. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.34.895s [29 laps]
12. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.34.941s [30 laps]
13. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.35.183s [33 laps]
14. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.35.229s [26 laps]
15. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.35.459s [38 laps]
16. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.35.913s [33 laps]
17. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.35.968s [35 laps]
18. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.36.169s [30 laps]
19. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.36.587s [33 laps]
20. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.37.803s [33 laps]
21. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.37.812s [28 laps]
22. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.39.649s [27 laps]

* Force India elected not to run in this session, so no times were set by Nico Hulkenberg and Paul di Resta.

F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – Friday press conference

While Thursday's press conference was notable for the absence of political questions, Friday's press conference was all about the politics. It got pretty awkward at times, more so than the straight transcript implies.

Present were Eric Boullier (Lotus), Stefano Domenicali (Ferrari), Robert Fernley (Force India), Norbert Haug (Mercedes), Christian Horner (Red Bull), and Martin Whitmarsh (McLaren).

Gentlemen a subject we can't escape, unfortunately: This grand prix is definitely one of the best organised, the drivers all say that. We've had a lot speculation from both angles, negative and positive, but I'd like to your views regarding the security

situation. Are you comfortable with how things are evolving?

Martin WHITMARSH: There have undoubtedly been difficult times here but from a pure team perspective, we've been comfortable with the situation. Clearly we race as an international sport all over the world and we have security concerns and issues at a number of races and we take that very seriously, and we're cautious, and we try to take the right precautions. But ultimately we're a race team. We're here to go motor racing and that's our number one priority.

Norbert HAUG: Absolutely the same.

Christian HORNER: Martin's summed it up perfectly, I think. Formula One is a sport at the end of the day and it's wrong for it to be used politically. We're here to race, we trust in the FIA, in the decisions that they made, and we're comfortable with the decisions that they have made. For us, it's about trying to extract the maximum from this weekend as a sporting team in a sporting championship. The calendar is obviously set by the FIA.

Eric BOULLIER: I think everything has been said by the first row, so, as far as we are concerned, as Lotus, and regarding the specific question, we are fine.

Stefano DOMENICALI: You are speaking about security and I would say that we have received all the guarantees from the organisers, the federation, the embassy, and it is pretty clear at the moment that it is like that. We don't seem to be the target of anyone that is protesting. We are here for the event that is racing, the race of the F1 World Championship and we are here to make the best of it. From a political point of view, the only thing I can say is that there are a lot of things going on and we really hope that all the dialogue that has started within the different parts will do the best thing in the shortest time possible for everyone. This is really the hope that we have, as sportsmen and as a man of the world.

Bob FERNLEY: I completely agree with the guys. Hopefully, the Formula One programme has brought the world's media here, it gives a good platform for debate and hopefully it will help with the healing process for Bahrain, and that's why we're here.

We'll go on to the sporting side. Martin, if I can start with you. You're leading both world championships. How have things evolved today for you in terms of free practice? You're not perhaps quite as competitive as we thought you would be.

MW: No, I think it's been a tricky day. The wind changed direction. I think from about half way through that [afternoon] session there was a tailwind through turns four, five, six and seven, which made it quite tricky for the drivers. I think we weren't happy with where we were in terms of grip, generally. But that's what Friday is about. It's about learning how to set the car up for this particular circuit and these particular conditions. I think the wind is going to be quite significant. It often is here. If you recall it is an island where the wind can change quite dramatically from 10 o'clock in the morning until midday and then drop off in the afternoon, so I think that makes it, with all the other challenges of selection of top gear for the race and for qualifying... wind direction is going to be quite an interesting challenge and if you get that right I think you'll be in good shape. So, overall, I think, we've got some reasonable data and the trick is to put that to good effect and make sure we can dial in and have a competitive car tomorrow.

Norbert, obviously a fantastic weekend for you last weekend and you still seem to be up there?

NH: Well, I think it's quite difficult to judge. I would not really read too much into the quickest time on Friday, we saw that before. I think people run various programmes, different programmes, but I think we are heading in the right direction. We learned quite a lot. The challenge is how to use the tyres, how to set up your car and then do the necessary amount of laps for the race and decide on how many stops you will do. You get the first impression of that on Friday. I think the team learned quite a lot. I haven't seen the analysis so far, we'll probably know a bit more later. Currently, I really cannot judge where we are. We should not read into the fact that we are first today that we are the big favourites for tomorrow and Sunday.

Christian, so on the same basis should I not read too much into the fact you were up in the top four today?

CH: I think it's been a sensible day for us, we've worked through a programme. I think this year the tyre has dominated performance and I think it's crucial to try and understand how the tyres work, how to get on top of those tyres and I think we've learned a lot over those first three races. Each of the races has been at a different nature of circuit, different conditions. We've seen the form of all the teams moving around a lot and the midfield making a big step as well. And that's produced some great racing, I think last weekend was a phenomenal race and that adds to the challenge. We've worked through our programme today, both the drivers seem reasonably happy with their cars and obviously a lot of information to look over tonight before we go into the final practice tomorrow.

Eric...

EB: We had a heavy Friday today with a lot of parts to evaluate. Parts of the upgrade from Shanghai, we had to use them back on the car. Also, a very heavy programme with the tyres. It's clear that the key for performance is the tyres and also the degradation for the race, as we saw in Shanghai, so we had early runs in practice and obviously heavier fuel load runs as well.

Any change Stefano?

SD: No, I think we have already said what we have to say. For us hopefully this will be the last grand prix of the most difficult start that we've had. But that's the way it is. At the track the only thing we have to do is try to maximise the package that we have and understand the tyres and prepare for the race. That will be crucial, as we already said, in this condition the only objective we have at the moment is to try to score the maximum points and considering that we have been third in the Championship it means a lot. It means that we have to stay focussed. Unfortunately it's very painful for us but that's the way it is. So heads up and work hard.

Bob, limited running, obviously...

BF: Well, we had a very busy morning and as you know we didn't run in FP2, we slightly rescheduled our programmes, but we're very comfortable. The data was collected this morning for what we need and we're very comfortable for FP3 tomorrow.

I have question for Norbert: Reuters reported yesterday that Aabar are considering a complete withdrawal of their Daimler stake, could you please comment on that, let us know what you know?

NH: I just hear the speculation and read the speculation. Nothing more.

...There's no discussion in Stuttgart?

NH: Nothing more to say, no.

Probably a question for all of you gentlemen. The thing that seems to be said is that politics and sport don't mix but even by some of your answers that you gave previously, it's quite obvious that they do. Given that, wouldn't it have been better to try to wait another year for Bahrain to progress a little further before coming back to have a race here? Martin, as the spokesman of FOTA?

MW: I didn't know I was the spokesman. I think, again, the calendar has been set for some time, we are the competitors, it's a race in the calendar, we are here to race. Period.

Does anyone have more to add to that? Christian? Norbert? No.

Since arriving I've been contacted by a number of Bahrainis who are actually supportive of the race; have you and any of your team members found similar contact from the citizens of Bahrain?

MW: I think there is a lot of support for the race from all parts of society here, so I think that's positive. Clearly often the majority aren't heard on these occasions but I think there's a fair amount of support, you can feel it here. I understand they've sold out the grandstand so presumably that's a tangible sign of support.

CH: I think the guys here have been very welcoming. They look after the teams very well and hopefully we can put on a good show on Sunday. I think at the end of the day it's a sport, we're a sporting team competing in a sport that competes at 20 venues around the world. We'll do our best as we do in all of those other events to do the best job we can on Sunday.

Christian, Stefano and Martin, as the representatives of the top three teams last year, setting aside the safety of F1 personnel, if there is any bloodshed or injury or worse this weekend, among protestors, that are clearly aimed at having an anti-F1 element, should F1 be held responsible in any way, is F1's presence here acting as a trigger?

MW: I don't think we're going to comment on that. We are here to take part in a race. I think we've made our position clear. So unless anyone else wants to add anything, I think we are here to race.

CH: I echo Martin's comments.

SD: We need to be positive in life. It seems that we are looking for something to happen and this is what we don't want, as I said. This is really the objective that all of us here in the paddock should have, to be honest.

The stock answer that keeps coming back when we ask about this race is that 'it's on the calendar.' There is a sporting commission, there is a technical commission, there's also a calendar commission. Now the first two actually go through the Formula One Commission and then onto the World Motor Sport Council. The calendar doesn't. Do you people believe that there is a need for the teams - for the Formula One commission, certainly - to have some input and to ratify calendars?

CH: I think that's a position for the promoter and the FIA at the end of the day. When we enter a championship at the beginning of the year a calendar is published and you have the choice whether to enter or not. It's something that historically has always been the same and it's down to the promoter and then the governing body that's responsible for the safety of the drivers, the safety of the spectators and the teams to decide where those venues are.

The question was, would you like to have input into it, as opposed to the procedure - I know the procedure?

SD: Normally it's not like that, to be honest. If we have to race over 17 Grands Prix, we need to have the organiser and the F1 has to have clearance from the teams so the discussion happens and this is related to the opportunity that they have. Then of course, the responsibility of other subjects is related to the national sporting authority, so the federation and the organiser, but that's the way it is at the moment.

EB: And if I may add something, we still have the opportunity to discuss with the governing body and the promoters about some adjustment in the calendar, not the location but maybe sometimes for logistical reasons we have some input.

Effectively, what we're then saying is that the teams are also responsible for the shape of the calendar the way it is at the moment, including the Bahrain race.

MW: Well, you're saying it, we're not. Sorry, I thought you said 'effectively you're saying it' but I don't think we're saying that at all. The commercial rights holder and the FIA agree the calendar together. I think you know that and so do we, so I don't know why we're having this discussion really.

But if it goes beyond 17, you have input.

MW: In theory we do, but as you know, the commercial rights holder... he has to get the races into the calendar and typically we're not consulted individually on each race.

The Sunni/Shi'a schism is a conflict that dates back over a millennia; how do you feel about being used as political tools in this game?

MW: Listen, I tell you, we're at the start of a fantastic World Championship. There have been three outstanding races and there's a great championship ahead of us. We've had three different winners, it's been a fantastic start to the championship and I think we can have a fantastic race here on Sunday. I don't think that going into what's happened over the last millennia or the politics around the world is something that most of us here are equipped to comment on.

We're all talking about politics, ethics etc. Do you agree that the main reason for having this race here and being here today is that there is so much money from the Emirates in Formula One and in some of the teams that you represent?

MW: Well, again, this isn't part of the Emirates and I think the commercial model of races, I think there is a lot of places in the world, and fortunately most places which pay reasonable money to hold a Grand Prix, so I don't think there's any particular premia in this part of the world.

Excuse me, don't you think that sometimes a race - even a fantastic race - becomes irrelevant if something more important happens somewhere?

SD: If I might say something about that, once again it seems really we (you) want to find something to make sure that this event is not happening and this is really what, hopefully, we, for sure, as a team, would like not to see and that's our approach, as I said. I don't think it's correct for us to go into a political discussion on what is happening. Of course we need to make sure that what has hopefully been started as a process in this country will happen soon and this is what everyone is really looking for but more than that, I think they will want to pull the things from different stories, different angles. Let's focus on our jobs and try, on our side, to speak about the sport. This is really our task, to be honest.

BF: If I could come in there as well, I think the Bahrain programme has been very very successful. As much as there is opposition to it, there is also a huge amount of people that are for this process, for the programme to bring through. As Force India, we are totally committed to this Grand Prix and to bringing this programme to reality for Bahrain, and hopefully, as we said earlier, it will form part of the healing process, and if we're part of that, we should be proud, not looking at ourselves and being negative.

Bob, your decision not to take part in the second part of practice has been interpreted as many things and one of them is a sort of field protest because of what happened to the team on Wednesday evening. Is it to be taken as that or what?

BF: I don't think it's because of that at all. I think that what you have to accept is that on Wednesday evening there was a very unfortunate incident for members of Force India, and there is no question, it de-stabilised the emotional element of our team. Yesterday evening we put a programme together which addressed all the issues from the team, we sat down with them all, and that meant a slight re-structuring of the programme in order that we could make sure that there was comfort within the team and that we delivered a very strong qualifying and race programme, and I have to say that Sheikh Abdulla, Bernie, everybody has been enormously helpful in our process, but we have, as a team, to make sure that we gel that together properly and it's nothing whatsoever to do with... It's an internal matter that just needs stability, we provided that stability and we've stuck with the programme that we've had to put in place. It's not a slight at all on the event, it's just about an internal structure of Force India. We've had to do that, we've done it with pleasure and we've supported our team in that process and as a result of supporting the team, the whole of our programme is now secure for going forward for the Bahrain Grand Prix.

F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – FP3 report

With a media storm raging outside, it was the action on track this morning that proved to be the quiet eye in the centre.

Talking heads around the world are debating the rights and wrongs of racing in Bahrain, at a grand prix some say is being raced on the blood of martyrs, while others call it an oasis of normality in a country in turmoil.

So there is action aplenty on the television news, on front pages, and in editorials around the world. On track, however, very little has happened.

Nico Rosberg was fastest man in FP3 this morning, repeating his feat of Friday afternoon, and all indications are that the young German is likely to line up on the front row of Sunday's race.

As for the rest of the times set on Saturday morning, however, there is little new to say. The three teams we've expected to show pace have done so, the tightly-knit mid-field continues to be tightly-knit, and Felipe Massa continues to struggle. So far, so normal – on the track, anyway.

The F1 paddock awoke this morning to dust-filled skies, the air so thick it was impossible to see the control tower from the entrance of the circuit.

While that dust may be less troublesome to our lungs than the teargas Bahrainis are breathing night after night, it is of serious concern to the brains on the pitwall, who have to rethink their tyre strategies in light of the elevated levels of degradation caused by the abrasive qualities of the track's surface.

Of additional concern is the dust's effect on engines. Because F1 teams are now limited to eight engines per season – to use more incurs a penalty – it is vital that the powerplants are as well-maintained as possible, so that each can live to race again.

To that end, the teams are changing their engine filters with increasing frequency as the day wears on, and some are concerned that dust build-up in Sunday's race could lead to engine failures on track.

FP3 times (unofficial)

1. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.33.254s [14 laps]
 2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.33.401s [14 laps]
 3. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.33.663s [15 laps]
 4. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.33.782s [16 laps]
 5. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.33.796s [16 laps]
 6. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.33.899s [14 laps]
 7. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.33.976s [14 laps]
 8. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.34.197s [14 laps]
 9. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.34.401s [16 laps]
 10. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.34.895s [11 laps]
 11. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.34.918s [12 laps]
 12. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.34.977s [12 laps]
 13. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.35.067s [17 laps]
 14. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.35.128s [14 laps]
 15. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.35.336s [22 laps]
 16. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.35.536s [15 laps]
 17. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.35.623s [16 laps]
 18. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.35.694s [19 laps]
 19. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.35.77s [21 laps]
 20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.36.532s [17 laps]
 21. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.37.267s [18 laps]
 22. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.37.654s [18 laps]
 23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.38.973s [11 laps]
 24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.39.221s [9 laps]
-

F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – Q1 report

Formula One has finally rocked up at a circuit where the air and track temperatures are within the optimal operating window for the rubber, but the amount of sand on track and dust in the air is making the tyres more fragile than ever.

Just goes to show that you should never ask for anything, as you just might get it. What's that old Chinese curse?: May all your wishes come true.

The teams have but one wish for the next twenty minutes – don't fall into the dropout zone.

The first times on the board were two and three seconds down on the best times set across the three free practice sessions, and as such were largely irrelevant. In the opening stages of Q1 it has been left to the tightly-packed mid-field to try and set a few bankers while the front runners wait in their garages, confident their competitors will clean up the dust and enable them to set that one flier needed to make it into Q2.

With the front runners heading out on track at the session's mid point, it was pole contender Nico Rosberg who caused the first moment of drama, taking a brief trip to Saudi Arabia via the vast run-off areas at Sakhir Circuit. Returning to the track after his trip through passport control, Rosberg's car was unharmed.

This being Q1, the times at the top are largely irrelevant. The times at the bottom are where it's at.

And with slightly more than two minutes to go, the dropout zone is comprised of the six usual suspects plus one, as is ever the case. The plus one – for the moment – is Bruno Senna, who currently stands behind Heikki Kovalainen on the timesheets.

Should Senna manage to save himself – the Brazilian driver is improving as I type – then the next man in the firing line is Daniel Ricciardo.

As the chequered flag draws ever nearer, Ricciardo and Senna both save their skins, at the cost of Pastor Maldonado. The seven men above Maldonado on the timesheets are all in the pits, so if the Venezuelan's final lap proves to be a fast one, then it is Jean-Eric Vergne who will fall at the first hurdle.

And fall he does, as Maldonado crosses the line in 1.34.639s.

But there's a last second drama, with Kovalainen crossing the line with a Q2-worthy time, knocking Michael Schumacher out after the chequered flag fell.

Dropout zone

18. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
19. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso)
20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
21. Charles Pic (Marussia)
22. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT)
23. Timo Glock (Marussia)
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)

F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – Q2 report

With Michael Schumacher's surprise departure the big story of Q1, there will be some late-night discussions in the Mercedes motorhome this evening, thanks to a strategic error that left the German high and dry in the pits in what became a very interesting opening to qualifying.

The other story, of lesser import, comes via Toro Rosso. Jean-Eric Vergne missed a weigh-bridge call, and is likely to see a penalty or fine as a consequence.

But as the session runs on it emerges that Schumacher's problem was not one of strategy, but rather that of a broken rear wing. It is not the first equipment failure suffered by the German this season, and it is hampering what should have been a return to form for the seven-time world champion, equipped with a competitive car for the first time since his comeback.

Pastor Maldonado, who made it through to Q2, has been sidelined by a KERS issue and so will sit out the session. The Venezuelan will start Sunday's race from P22 as a consequence, thanks to a five-place grid penalty for a new gearbox added to a P17 qualifying.

The second session didn't offer much in the way of surprises, although for a few seconds after the chequered flag fell it looked as though Ferrari had lost both drivers. Then Fernando Alonso crossed the line in P4, leaving the ailing Felipe Massa the only prancing horse to suffer the continued indignity of dropping out in Q2.

The final seconds after the flag fell saw a few changes in position, notably Kimi Raikkonen and Kamui Kobayashi being knocked into the dropout zone by Alonso and Romain Grosjean, the latter saving his own skin by knocking out his teammate.

Joining Raikkonen and Kobayashi in the dropout zone are Nico Hulkenberg, Massa, Bruno Senna, Heikki Kovalainen, and Maldonado.

It was an incredibly competitive session, with the spread between P1 and P13 a mere seven-tenths.

Dropout zone

11. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus)
12. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
13. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India)

14. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
15. Bruno Senna (Williams)
16. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham)
17. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)*

* Maldonado will start Sunday's race from P22, thanks to a five-place grid penalty caused by a gearbox change.

F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – Q3 report

As the pitlane opened for the final round of qualifying at the Sakhir International Circuit, eight of Formula One's twelve teams had drivers in contention.

But the real battle is the one between McLaren, Red Bull, and Nico Rosberg, all of whom have shown decent pace at various points of the weekend. At least, it would be a battle of Rosberg left the pits.

With Q3 more than half run, only Lewis Hamilton, Jenson Button, Mark Webber, and Sebastian Vettel had times on the board.

With only three minutes remaining, Vettel was the only driver out on track.

But as Vettel returned to the pits with two-and-a-half minutes remaining, Nico Rosberg, Romain Grosjean, Paul di Resta, Sergio Perez, and Daniel Ricciardo took to the track as a group, leaving Fernando Alonso the only man in danger of failing to set a time.

One minute later, all barring the Ferrari driver were out on track, getting their outlaps underway so that there was time to start a final timed lap before the chequered flag fell.

Alonso remained in the pits, and is not in the position to set a timed lap in this session.

It was all to play for after the chequered flag fell, with Rosberg in a provisional P4 after two strong sectors and some errors.

Vettel took provisional pole, with Hamilton crossing the line in a provisional P2. Only Button was out on track and able to challenge the Red Bull driver, who has yet to sit on the front row this season.

But Button aborted his lap and returned to the pits, leaving the front row to Vettel and Hamilton.

Provisional grid

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

* Pastor Maldonado was issued with a five-place grid penalty for a gearbox change, and so starts in P22 despite qualifying in P17.

F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – Saturday press conference

By and large, politics took a back seat at this afternoon's press conference, with the questions asked of the drivers almost all falling into the racing camp.

Present were Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), Lewis Hamilton (McLaren), and Mark Webber (Red Bull).

Sebastian, four races into the 2012 season and your first pole position of the season? I take it it's good to be back?

Sebastian VETTEL: Yeah, it obviously feels great and I think this one I completely owe it to the team, to the guys. It wasn't the easiest start to the season for us. Surely, a lot of expectations, but I think more than anything it's what we expect from ourselves, and we didn't match our expectations and we've been extremely busy working on the car, trimming here and there, finding the perfect solution and the right way to go, the way forward. And the boys – I don't think they had much sleep to be honest in the first four races. We had a tough weekend last weekend in China and now, here, they seriously had a lack of sleep, and it's very good to put the car on pole. I think both of us, we owe the result today to the team – it's good. The car felt much better all weekend. I was quite happy. I didn't have the smoothest qualifying, I was nearly out in Q1 and nearly out in Q2 but then I knew that when I get the lap in – I nail it – then we should be in a better place. It's great, obviously, to see that we've just beaten Lewis for pole, so I'm very happy.

Lewis, too, I'm sure a few anxious moments for you in qualifying one and compared to this morning with the pace of your car so much better in qualifying session. So even though you're second, is that satisfying overall?

Lewis HAMILTON: Definitely. I'm very happy with the job we've done. Just been trying to improve the set-up all weekend and in FP3 it wasn't the most spectacular. But yeah, a little bit close in Q1 but thank goodness we got through. Generally, probably one of my best qualifying sessions, even though obviously in the past we did it on the first lap, getting pole position, but the first lap wasn't great and the second lap was great. I'm quite happy with that and we just need to keep on pushing.

Mark, you were on provisional pole but was this just a track that was evolving constantly right up until the last car went over the line? Was that what separated you from your team-mate today?

Mark WEBBER: I think it's always beneficial if you can go a bit later, especially today, but you know we take it in turns at each race and this track looked particularly sensitive to that all weekend. In the end Seb did a good lap, it was a good pole. In the end we're satisfied with being towards the front. There have been some big gaps to the opposition, on Saturday in particular. I think we're pretty surprised to be as competitive as we are on a track that is demanding of probably not some of our strengths. All in all it's for the guys. We're at the front and we can definitely race from there.

You made a slight mistake, Mark. Did that cost you any time whatsoever?

MW: In?

On your final run, just a little lock-up.

MW: No. That was not too bad. I didn't leave enough of a gap to Paul [di Resta] actually. I was surprised by how much I closed on him and got him a little bit in I3, so lost a little bit there. That was the only thing I would have liked to have done better, given him a better gap. But, yeah, we're here.

Throughout this weekend we've seen that it's been very difficult to string together the perfect lap. Sebastian, you've got to do 57 of them in Sunday's race. Just how tough will that be, even from pole position?

SV: I think it's always tough. The race here is long and anything can happen. I think we are pretty aggressive and we should be better off in the race. The race pace has proven to be pretty consistent over the last couple of races. This one, I'm definitely happier with how the car feels and we should be able to hopefully get the same kind of feeling and result tomorrow. I'm looking forward to the start of the race and then I think it will be pretty tight to be honest. Of course, you're obviously dealing here with the top three but I think there are also other people tomorrow who will have a very good chance. I think Nico has been very, very strong all weekend, and the Lotus guys they can surprise. So, in terms of race pace, I think everyone will be much closer together and I just hope we can keep it up and have a good result tomorrow.

Your 31st pole position Sebastian, and your second pole position here

SV: 31? Shit! Yeah, pretty happy, obviously, as I mentioned. I felt much happier with the car all weekend, I went out and I think we've always had the ability to go reasonably quick. Surely it depends a little bit when and where you are, which tyres etc., but I had a good feeling all throughout the weekend and I'm very happy. I knew in qualifying we should be able to put the car higher up this time in qualifying. Q1 and Q2 wasn't perfect, the laps I got in were not 100 per cent without mistakes and I knew in the third qualifying that getting everything together we should be in a better place. First run I obviously ran the set I scrubbed in Q2, wasn't ideal, so I knew that with a new tyre there was a little bit again to gain and it did happen, so I'm very happy, very pleased and extremely happy for the team because the guys have done incredible lately. Four races so far but the last two weekends in particular, here and China, I don't know how they managed, how they do it. They get hardly any sleep, probably an hour or two or three on average every night and still they're full of energy and willing to work even harder – and I think we owe the result to those guys in the garage today.

You mentioned you found some answers in China and a step forward here, can you give us some indication of that?

SV: Well, I think given the balance we had – or I had in particular – the first two races where I wasn't happy, we decided in China to go back and see where we are. Equally, Mark carried on, which I think was good to get a straight comparison. And we found that the new car, or new package, has its advantages and the old package has its advantages and I think it was good to get an answer on that. So, we ended up with two cars, either one probably strong in a certain area so I think it helped us also going into this weekend trying to set up the car, working with the tyres, which seem to be tricky this year. We felt a little bit happier all around, also given the high temperatures here, which is not making life easier.

What's it like driving on the soft tyres? Everyone's saying that's what it's going to be about during the race itself.

SV: I think they worked pretty well. Yesterday in second practice I improved by one-tenth, I don't know why, so today yeah, I was able to squeeze the same amount of lap time out of the tyres that everyone else compared to the hard – or the medium – tyre. So, yeah, I think we should be in a good position tomorrow. I think the car is good in the race, we've proven in the last races that race pace is good enough to get some big points. Now we are starting for the first time a little bit further up and yeah, hopefully that makes our life a little bit easier. I'm looking forward to the start, the first corner, first lap and yeah, if we're not P15 after the first lap then it will be a different race. So, fingers crossed, but surely tomorrow with the temperatures being so hot it will be crucial to take care of those tyres.

Lewis, the one thing that's been constant throughout the season is you on the front row, or at least first and second in qualifying – even if obviously in China you got the penalty – but you must be pleased with the way qualifying has been going this year?

LH: Absolutely. Very happy with the performance of the car and the performance of the team and improvements that we've been making – and also really happy with the laps that I've been doing. I've been really eking out everything that I can from the car. Today we just weren't quick enough to get a pole but still to be on the front row is a great feeling and compared to the last race, obviously we were on the front row but we weren't able to start

there with the penalty. This weekend we're in a much better position, so I'm really excited for a good race but as Sebastian said, it's going to be tough to look after the tyres tomorrow.

And also the rivals are different. All of a sudden it's dark blue whereas at the last race it was grey with Mercedes.

LH: Yeah, absolutely, they've clearly made a good step this weekend. I anticipated they'd be very quick this weekend and in their long run pace they're very strong, probably the strongest – and Mark's been the fastest in all the races so far I think – so it'll be interesting tomorrow but we'll do everything we can to give them a run for their money.

And is it all about tyres and temperatures and wind at this circuit at this moment?

LH: It is. The wind, I don't remember any other circuit – maybe Barcelona – but otherwise this is one of the trickiest circuits in terms of the wind direction and how it helps and the positives and negatives on certain corners. It's quite interesting. It's not easy to get it right: some of us do, some of us don't.

Mark, you said yesterday the challenge was to get it all together. Presumably you got it all together?

MW: Yeah, it was a pretty good session. Quali wasn't easy for us in the first part. And I think the guys have done a great job. Pretty happy with Q3 to be honest, we're up there towards the front.

Is it all about the rear tyres, about traction?

MW: Yeah, it's pretty tough on the tyres here, bit of a surprise for all of us yesterday. We did our homework and we'll how that obviously unfolds in the GP.

And this is your best grid here.

MW: Yeah, it's normally not a great track for me but I've been quick all weekend and I feel confident for the race.

And the Australian Junior Team starts sixth on the grid – as in Daniel [Ricciardo].

MW: Oh, I didn't know that. Good effort!

Question to all of you: coming into the weekend, one of the things that we heard was a possible concern was the engine due to dust and sand. We've seen a very very dusty day today. Have you got concerns about your engines in the race tomorrow?

SV: No, because we've run here previously and it's more or less the same: sometimes more sand, sometimes less. They do a good job here around the track, cleaning the circuit. I was surprised this year that there seemed to be less dust on the track than in previous years, so I think that if they keep doing that we should be OK tomorrow concerning the engine.

LH: The same really. The engineers do a fantastic job to design the engine, it's hardly affected, the filters are very, very good, so it doesn't cause us any trouble.

Sebastian, how much of a relief is it for you to get this pole position after the difficult start to the season? Were you worried that this could be a more difficult season: now you have the car that you were used to?

SV: Pretty much the same way as people around, really. Not us inside the team, not myself. I started to... it looked like panic, it's the same now. We've got a very good result today and I'm very happy. Of course I'm happy to be on pole for tomorrow's race. For sure it feels good but zero points scored so far as the race is tomorrow. I think we are only a couple of races into the season, as I've mentioned many times now because I've had the same questions. We didn't have the start that maybe we expected and people probably expected of us, but since day one, where we realised that maybe we weren't as strong as we wanted to be, we've worked very very hard and this is step one towards the right direction so we keep fighting and keep working hard to make sure that the results similar to today come more often again.

Sebastian and Mark, we saw that in the last race Nico Rosberg did very well, but today he's further back as you were in the last race. Is this a new phase for the team or is it a characteristic of the season in Formula 1, all these changes?

SV: I think that we've seen so far that things can change very quickly. We've seen that Nico had a phenomenal lap in China, he out-qualified everyone by half a second, no one had a chance on that Saturday and to be fair, also on Sunday he was in a league of his own. This weekend I think they're very strong again. I think Michael went out in Q1 because they didn't run again and then I don't know what happened to Nico. I heard that he's fifth so I don't consider that is qualifying at the back, and I think they will be very strong tomorrow. This circuit is known for being a bit of an engine circuit: they have a very strong package, they are very quick on the straights so surely, given the pace he had all weekend, we expected him maybe to be a bit stronger in qualifying, but given the margins and given the gaps between the cars, first, second, third, fifth, I haven't seen the complete result yet but I don't think there's much between them, so a little mistake here or there is enough to maybe not get the best result you can or you could on that day. Equally, I went out last weekend in Q2, or I didn't make it to Q3 and there wasn't much missing, so I think it's fairly close this year and I think that the racing we have seen as well and probably will see again tomorrow.

Sebastian, two days ago you said that you were lacking something to have a winning car. Now did you change your mind? And the second question is about Nico: it seems that Nico saved a set of new soft tyres. Is that crucial or doesn't it matter?

SV: Surely it's an advantage for him if he has more sets of new tyres. How much of an advantage you will see tomorrow. Sometimes it turns out to be a massive advantage, sometimes none. People run different strategies and we start to do that already on Saturday. All in all, I'm very pleased with the result today. As I said, I was much happier with the car all weekend and felt that we can qualify in a much better position. Going into qualifying, I knew that with a little bit here and there we could potentially go on pole. Going into Q3, seeing everyone's first shot – Lewis very competitive – I know that we should be able to match him, maybe go a bit quicker so in the end, I'm very happy that we did, but I still think that for tomorrow, other people are probably the favourites. We start from the front row, P1, but it's a long race and a lot of things can happen. Anyway, I'm looking forward to the race, so we will see.

Lewis, I believe you are the first driver in F1 history that finished the first three races of the season in third position, and you've never won here before. Do you think you can do it tomorrow, since the car seems competitive on all tracks?

LH: It's going to be massively hard tomorrow, for sure. We seem to have had some good races here. I think in my first year I was second here – we struggled a little bit that year and yet we still got good results and I think we have a better car this year to fight the Red Bulls in the race. I think their race pace has generally been a little bit quicker in the last couple of races, within a tenth (of a second) of race pace, but we've made some improvements so I hope that tomorrow our set-up works really well for us and we can challenge for a win.

Lewis, you have a huge fan base in the Middle East: what would you like to say to your fans?

LH: To my fans here... Growing up I never ever thought that I would ever have fans so to learn that I have more and more fans coming from different places and particularly the Middle East is a fantastic feeling, so I'm very much appreciative of all the support that they give me and I hope that many of them come this weekend. And a big thank you to all of them for some of the messages that I get, because I do notice that I have certain messages on Twitter or Facebook from out here in the Middle East, so just a big thank you to them, and fingers crossed for the season.

Sebastian, as it was mentioned already, Rosberg had one run in each of the qualifying sessions. I think you had two attempts each. Was that planned or were there some problems?

SV: No, surely it was not planned. Ideally you go through with one run only, the minimum amount of effort so in the first qualifying I think both Mark and myself weren't happy with the first run and then we were able to re-balance the car and we were maybe then fine in the second run. But it just shows how competitive it is, how close it can be. I saw that Lewis was P16 or 17 and just made it by four hundredths so half a tenth. With the track improving and the other people having very competitive cars, it's very close. The same in Q2: I wasn't entirely happy with my lap. I made a little bit of a mistake going into turn eight and I know that I should have been in a better place in Q2. I wasn't keen to go out and then we went out but I didn't make it across the line in time in order to have another go, so fortunately it was good enough, but again, in Q2, I think Kimi got caught out and didn't make it to Q3 so... If you can make it with one run, that's preferred because you save tyres.

Sebastian, being a two time World Champion already, how much did it help not to panic after the first races?

SV: It's the same as I said before, I think we had no reason to panic and equally, now it's not as if we are living in a different world, so we still know that we have a lot to do, a lot of work ahead of us. Surely the result is very good for all of us, because it gives you a lot of energy knowing that if you work hard, you also get the rewards. As I mentioned, especially for the guys in the garage, working day and night, as much as they can, I think it's good to be back on top, but we have a race tomorrow and that's when we can score points and not before. As I said, I don't think we had a reason to panic and equally, now the world is still turning and we keep fighting and keep doing what we were doing, working hard and trying to come back to where we have been last year.

With regards to the death of a young man last night in the protests that have marred this Grand Prix, I just wondered if any of you drivers would care to comment on that at all?

SV: It's the first time that I've heard about it. I don't know what happened so it's difficult to comment. I think it's always... either you know the person or you don't, but I think it's always dreadful if someone dies, but I don't know what happened, so...

MW: I don't know the situation so... it's never good, of course.

F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – Race report

It took four races, but he's done it at last – Sebastian Vettel has claimed his first grand prix victory of the season.

But the Bahrain Grand Prix was not the lights-to-flag walkover Vettel made his speciality last season. Instead, the Red Bull driver was chased to the chequered flag by the Lotus of Kimi Raikkonen, who came within a hair's breadth of his first post-comeback victory.

Despite the Finn's close but no cigar was result, it was an excellent day for the Lotus team – Raikkonen was followed home by Romain Grosjean, who claimed the bottom step of the podium and the first double-podium of the season for Enstone.

The hot track temperatures served Lotus well this afternoon: both Raikkonen and Grosjean were able to make the most of their tyres, although the Finn had an extra set of rubber to play with after the team elected to play tactics with their qualifying strategy. Raikkonen had qualified for Sunday's race in P11, and made the most of his extra rubber in the opening stages, climbing up to third place within ten laps.

By lap 24, the Finnish driver had passed his teammate. And within another ten laps he was closing on race leader Vettel, and looking certain to pass. But it was not to be – after a single unsuccessful attempt from Raikkonen the Red Bull driver was able to hold the Lotus man at bay until the end of the race, extending his lead after the final pit stop phase.

While Lotus shone, McLaren struggled. The perfectionist British racers continue to struggle in their pit stops, and the Bahrain Grand Prix was no exception. Lewis Hamilton had two slow stops, and spent more than 22 seconds stationary in the pits across the two botched efforts, both caused by problems with the wheel nut on the left rear.

One botched stop might have been salvageable, but two really hampers a racer's best efforts on track.

It was another bad day for Jenson Button – the British driver was running in P7 in the final phase of the race and closing in on the KERS-less Force India of Paul di Resta ahead when he suffered a puncture and wheeled slowly back to the pits, eventually making it there in P12. On the penultimate lap, Button's bad day got worse when he was forced to retire from the race as the result of as-yet-unspecified engine problems.

Button's failing was di Resta's saving – the Scot had driven an excellent race to be running where he was, but his two-stop strategy made him vulnerable to opponents on fresh rubber after the final pit stop phase. Had Button not retired when he did, it is unlikely that the Scot would have been able hold position. Luckily for him, once the McLaren was out of the way the remaining competition was too far behind on track to be a threat in the limited track time remaining.

Felipe Massa delivered his strongest performance of the season thus far for Ferrari, crossing the line in P9 and collecting a small clutch of points – his first of the year – for the team. It will not be enough to silence the Brazilian's critics, however – while the Paulista may have finished ahead of Perez this weekend, there are still those who call for the Scuderia to change their second driver at the earliest opportunity.

Bahrain Grand Prix results (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1h35m10.990s
2. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) + 3.333s
3. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) + 10.194s
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull) + 38.788s
5. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) + 55.460s
6. Paul di Resta (Force India) + 57.543s
7. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) + 57.803s
8. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) + 58.984s
9. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) + 64.999s
10. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) + 71.490s
11. Sergio Perez (Sauber) + 72.702s
12. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) + 76.539s
13. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) + 90.334s
14. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) + 93.723s
15. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) + 1 lap
16. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) + 1 lap
17. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) + 1 lap
18. Jenson Button (McLaren) + 2 laps
19. Timo Glock (Marussia) + 2 laps
20. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) + 2 laps
21. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) + 2 laps
22. Bruno Senna (Williams) + 3 laps

Pastor Maldonado (Williams) RET

Charles Pic (Marussia) RET

F1 Bahrain Grand Prix – Sunday press conference

With the politics off the agenda for 57 laps, the 2012 Bahrain Grand Prix delivered the best racing anyone in Formula One had ever seen at the Sakhir International Circuit. Thanks to the thrills and spills on track, the post-race press conference was a jubilant affair.

Present were Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus), and Romain Grosjean (Lotus).

Congratulations Sebastian. As defending champion it's always nice to get your first win of the season, even if it is at the fourth time of asking.

Sebastian VETTEL: Yeah, I think it was an incredible race. Extremely tough. Sometimes we had a decent gap but still even from the start we had a very good start, which was crucial. I was able to pull away immediately and pull away from the pack. That turned out to be a big advantage because we always had to go on a used set of tyres as we used nearly all of them yesterday in qualifying. We could see, Kimi was getting through, he was very quick and so was Romain. A difficult race but with the strategy everything seemed to work so I can only say a big thanks to the boys in the garage. I said it yesterday: incredible job they've done over the first four races. The amount of work they had and that we gave them in particular because we weren't happy with the car and we asked for little tweaks here and there and they came back with new parts, old parts, back with the new parts, back with the old parts, back and forth, so extremely tough and they spent a lot of hours in the garage trying to get the car to our liking and I think we got it this weekend together for the first time and I was very happy in qualifying and throughout the whole race to be fair. So given the fact that Kimi found a dealership somewhere where he got some new tyres from, which allowed him to start every new stint on new tyres, it was extremely tough to keep them behind us. Once he was very close and I thought he would get more than just one shot but it turned out to be enough and in the end I was even pulling away a little bit and I could control the last stint. All in all, very happy and very proud of the team.

But I have to ask though, had this race been one lap longer, what would have happened? You stopped fairly suddenly after the chequered flag.

SV: Yeah, a couple of cars did. I had some company down there! I think Nico stopped as well. We were probably surprised by the pace we went in the race. Obviously these guys [Lotus] were pushing us so we couldn't afford to lift but it was enough. We knew how many laps there were from the start so it was fine I guess.

Kimi, welcome back to the podium in Formula One. You had the tyres but was the race win there for you instead?

Kimi RAIKKONEN: I think we gave ourselves a chance at least. It's a bit disappointing that I didn't manage to do it. But I made a small mistake at the beginning and lost one place to Ferrari. I had to re-overtake him and it took a little time. I got past the people quite easily but if you look in the end I think we still took too long and we couldn't win the race. But at least we got the podium with both cars. After the last race we tried hard and failed and probably people thought we were a bit stupid. Even after yesterday what we did. But it turned out to be the right decision and I think the team deserves what we have achieved now. We have been working hard. We've not been 100 per cent happy with how the weekends have run so far but finally we've got some proper results for the team, so it's an important step.

Had you been able to get past your team-mate Romain Grosjean in the middle part of the race, a little sooner, would that have made the victory a little easier for you? You certainly had the pace in that middle stint?

KR: Yeah but there are no team orders and we know the rules. I try to get past as quickly as I can but it's not easy with two similar cars. It's always easy to say afterwards 'if we had done that' but in the end we were not fast enough to win and we have to take the second. I got one chance on Sebastian but I chose the wrong side under braking, so that was it really. In the end I didn't have any other chances to try. It's disappointing to finish second but after the last race we have to take it and be pretty happy.

Turning to you, Romain, I'm sure no disappointment whatsoever at finishing third, your first podium in Formula One.

Romain GROSJEAN: For sure it's great. It's a strange feeling so far. I think I will be delighted tonight. But I'm very proud of the team, all we did in the

race. We knew we had a good car but I think we were surprised at the beginning by how quick we were. And we chose a different strategy to Kimi. It turned out to be not too bad at the end. Our car is very competitive in what so far has been a very tight season. Every small detail makes a huge difference, so the team is working very hard bringing new pieces as well and then putting back the old and trying to see which one is the best – not always easy when you have so little running. But I think we can be very happy with what we did and personally I'm very, very happy to be on my first podium. It's quite a good feeling I have to say! I was saying first points, then top five, then podium but I jumped one step. The next step will be victory but well, that will take time and now I think we can be happy and now we can have a week off to enjoy the time and to work a little bit at the factory and to find the six or seven second gap there was to Sebastian.

Returning to you Sebastian. Four races, four different winners. What does that say about Formula One in 2012?

SV: I think as Romain touched on, it's a very tight season, cars are very close to each other and small things can make a huge difference on a Sunday. I think we started the season saying that the McLaren is the best car by far, by quite a bit, but we've seen that Sunday it can be a different picture. I think they still have one of the strongest packages but as I said you need to get everything right. You need to have the right tyres, you need to treat them right, you need to find the right set-up over the course of the weekend so a lot of things to look out for. I'm very happy we made it here. We were not quite sure how competitive we would be. China was a very good lesson for us to understand the weakness of the car a little but more, driving with two different packages. For here we focused on the new package, pushing that forward on a circuit where you need a lot of power as well. I think Renault did a fantastic job – one, two, three all powered by Renault, so congratulations to them as well. I'm just happy for now, I don't really care what happens in the next race, at least not today. I think we will have a good time now and then push harder so that we are there again next race.

Sebastian, well done, a little bit of relief to be back on the top step of the podium?

SV: Of course I'm happy, I mean, y'know, I think we had to work extremely hard in the first couple of races, we were not where we wanted to be so therefore I'm extremely happy that we had a much better weekend here. Friday morning, the first time I went out, I felt much happier with the car balance, so I think we found a reasonable package that seemed to work on this circuit pretty well so all in all, I'm very pleased. As I said yesterday, I think I owe this one to the team, to the boys. As I touched on, they've been working so hard, giving them an extremely hard time here at the circuit, back in the factory, we all try to find the best configuration. I don't want you to look in the back of our garage, it's pretty busy and pretty messy: a lot of work, a lot of parts. So we try to get the best package together. As I said, very good yesterday in qualifying and today in the race obviously crucial to get a good start. Then I was able to pull away by three or four seconds immediately which turned out to be crucial. By the time Romain got past Lewis I think he had more or less had the same pace. At the end of the stints I think we were a little bit superior and then yeah, second stint pretty much the same. Kimi always had new tyres so we knew he would be a danger until the last lap. Again, obviously in the beginning trying not to lose too much. I think especially that second-last stint where we were on option tyres, Kimi was on a new prime tyre, so it was difficult. I thought he would make his way past pretty easily. I tried to defend, one time it was really close and after that it seemed that he was running into the same kind of problems with the tyres and we were able to... not pull away but we could open a bit of a gap. So yeah, a very, very tight and difficult race. Obviously not too busy in terms of overtaking and wheel to wheel racing for me, but I knew that every single corner would be crucial with no mistakes allowed. I kept the car on the track at all the time which was a help and yeah, great result and very, very happy.

You had a faster pitstop at the last pitstop but then you seemed to be held up by a Caterham in front of you.

SV: Yeah, a little bit, but it's the same story for all of us. You know, you get there first and depending on where you run into traffic you might get held up – but the guys did a very good job all race long, all the guys we lapped. You're never going to get past without losing a little bit but it's the same when Kimi or Romain faces the traffic. They run into the same problems. I have to say given the amount of marbles and dirt and sand and pickup off-line, they were very fair.

You didn't explain why you had to pull off at the end.

SV: Well, I think I wasn't the only one...

But that was another thing altogether...

SV: I don't know.

You were just told to pull off?

SV: Yeah, I think it's not the first time you saw that. It was a very quick race, the pace was extremely high, we had no time at any stage to rest, so a lot of pressure always from behind. So pushing hard and yeah, I was too exhausted to do the in-lap!

Except you had to run the whole pitlane...

SV: By then I'd found some extra KERS

Kimi, again a team that changed the car quite a lot during this weekend, especially after last weekend as well – but obviously it was a good car.

KR: My car was the same the whole weekend. We tried two cars with different floors but I mean in the end I don't think there's much difference between them but for sure it looks like we did the right thing. The car cannot be too bad because we finished second and third, we're still not happy in certain areas but that's a pretty normal thing. You're never really 100 per cent happy with things. You always try to find something new and improved. But, I mean, great thing for the team to finish second and third, so I'm happy for them but a bit disappointed to not have more, to not be able to challenge more for the win. I'm not winning but that's life.

Was it difficult even with the DRS to get really, really close, close enough?

KR: I think like you saw on TV I got close enough once to have a chance to try but I chose the wrong side, so that's about it. After that my tyres dropped off a bit and I couldn't get close enough. Yep, next time we try, hopefully we can put ourselves in a similar position later on this season in the next coming races. It's not going to be easy but we will try. And that would be nice.

Romain, congratulations to you on your first podium, tell us about the start. It must have been pretty good?

RG: Yeah, it was! I think we are doing some pretty good starts since the beginning, except Melbourne. Malaysia, China and here we have some very good starts. I think it was important for me to be straight up to the front. Then I have to say that I really enjoyed the first stint, the car was fantastic on the option and I could overtake Mark Webber and then Lewis Hamilton. I thought I would come back a little bit on Sebastian and then we choose to go for the prime on the second stint, and it appears that there were a little bit less grip, it was more difficult and Kimi was behind me. He passed me and then the tyres went away. I think the last two stints were pretty good, our car was feeling good, the team can be proud of what they did because with

this season so tight between cars it's very difficult to be at the front and we have two cars on the podium which is extremely good. We're working very hard as well, trying some new pieces – the old and new and seeing what is the best – but it's always difficult. Tyres, as you know, are going away quite quickly and it doesn't give you much free practice time but our podium feels pretty good and I think it will feel even better when I'm on the plane home and take one or two days to relax before going to the factory and working and trying to get a better car for the next race.

Was the car better on primes from then on, after using the options from the start?

RG: Unfortunately not. It was pretty good on the two last stints with the new prime but I had a choice between scrubbed primes and scrubbed options for stint two because I did a mistake in Q2 run one where I went wide and used one extra set of options. If I had one new set of options I think I would have put it on and maybe got closer to Seb – but I have to be happy with third place, it's a first podium, we have two cars here and that's fantastic.

Kimi, was it the right decision to come in for the last pit stop at the same time as Sebastian? Could you have waited one more lap?

KR: That was the plan. Even if we came in a lap later it would be more or less the same. That was our plan and we followed it. They came in at the same time.

Sebastian, Lotus already had about 11 kph more in top speed in practice and then on top of that Kimi had DRS and he was behind you. Did it surprise you that you could keep him behind?

SV: I thought exactly the same thing to be honest, when I saw that he was closing in, because we've seen that they are very quick on the straight all weekend. I was particularly aware that as soon as he got into the DRS zone then it would be difficult to keep him behind. So yeah, I think we could see that one time he was fairly close, he got the DRS and he had more speed at the end of the straight than I had. Sure, I think that you pick your optimum for speed, downforce, top speed and you pick whatever you believe is best. I think that all in all it was the right decision to do what we did. I used DRS once in the race, so I didn't use it too often, but after that, I was happy that Kimi ran into the same problems with the tyres and I could get a little bit of a gap out of the last corner which was enough to survive the straight. I think we also had a bit of head wind down the straight, and that's also an advantage for the car behind. I would say it was just enough.

The question is for the three drivers: a comment from you about four races, four different winners from different teams, and what do you expect from the rest of the season?

SV: As we've said, I think it's obviously very good to watch. I think those four races have been extremely tight. We had one race where it was pretty chaotic, in Malaysia, with rain etc so up and down. Small things can make a big difference over the weekend – how much tyres you might have left, lap one, gear ratios you might pick, whether DRS is effective or not and you can come back. I think it was a different race here compared to the last race where we had people running in a chain and not being able to pass or not being able to pass too easily. All these things make a big difference and temperature-wise, all four races were very different. Track layouts were different so I'm not surprised that we have a different result every weekend.

RG: Who knows? Who is able to tell who will be World Champion? I think it's like it's never been before. Q2 in China was incredible: ten cars in three tenths or eleven cars. It's just amazing and it just depends who is bringing new updates, but I think the season will be how it is so far and you will have to get the last hundredths and the last tenths to get on the podium.

You're now going to have three days of testing in Mugello ; do you think that some teams are going to bring big updates, like Ferrari who are struggling a lot? What are your plans for your cars, are you also having big updates? Do you more or less know the direction?

KR: I don't what the others are doing, you will have to ask them. I'm not aware of our plans regarding the test and we will see what happens there. I haven't talked about it. We first have to finish this race and then put the effort into the test and then go racing after that. I can't say what the other teams are going to do. We try to find more understanding of the car and improve it.

SV: First of all, I think it will be difficult to create a miracle. I think the regulations this year make it very difficult so sure I think every team has something on the list. We've seen that sometimes people bring parts and they don't work so it's not always given that a new parts push you in the right direction so of course it's very useful to have a test in Mugello, to have some more time than just in free practice on Friday, to evaluate first of all whether the package you are running is the best and whatever new parts you might have for the week after in Barcelona is the right way to go.

Kimi, a good result today, but do you think Lotus can keep up the momentum for the next races?

KR: We will try. It's the same story; I have no idea what's going to happen in the next races but the team's been pushing hard to try to improve the car, bringing new parts, but of course they haven't been working as well as we hoped, but anyhow, they are bringing new updates every time when they can. We try to keep pushing and stay up there, but I cannot answer because they are not. That's our aim and that's what we're working for and hopefully it will happen, but who knows how well we can improve or what the others will do. The team is doing good work and we deserve to be here and hopefully we can stay up here in other races also.

Are you surprised, Kimi, that it took you only four races to return to the podium?

KR: It could have been in the first three races also, not putting ourselves in a bad position and some problems, being a bit smarter than certain teams but we know from the winter that we have a very good car, good baseline package and just have to make the right decisions and put ourselves where the car can be. This weekend it worked, last weekend it didn't. We know that the speed is there, we just need to try to get everything exactly right.
