

Getting to know the Circuit Spa-Francorchamps

Of all the circuits I visited last year, only one gave me the shivers. Pulling into the media car park at Spa you can see up Eau Rouge, and the day I arrived the top of the hill had disappeared into the mist.

While other tracks have a similar history, there's something special – and indefinable – about Spa.

It's not just that the names of the corners are evocative (although names like La Source, Eau Rouge, Radillon, Pouhon, Les Combes, Stavelot, and Bus Stop each cause a mini shiver). There's something haunting about the hills, the trees, and the mist.

This is where pure racing happens, and it is a circuit like no other.

There are three key braking points on the circuit, and each of the three presents a different overtaking opportunity. First comes the approach to La Source, which sees heavy braking as drivers reduce speed to an average 60 kph, then the Les Combes chicane. Finally, it's the Bus Stop chicane.

Because Spa is such a high-speed track, the brakes aren't used as often as they would be on a circuit filled with slow-speed corners. But that, combined with the weather (traditionally chilly and damp, if not cold and wet), creates its own problems – getting the brakes up to optimum temperature and then keeping them there is a real struggle.

Another braking characteristic that sets Spa apart is the uphill start. Drivers need to hold their cars on the brakes while lined up on the grid, which occasionally leads to some interesting starts.

Spa really is all about the engines – power makes a real difference here, as Cosworth explain.

“The Belgian Grand Prix sees the Formula 1 season enter ‘engine territory’ as Spa-Francorchamps, the longest track of the season, puts the focus on outright engine power,” the engine manufacturer is quoted as saying in a Williams press release.

“Together with the next race at Monza, the race at Spa is the most demanding event of the year for engines. The composition of medium-high speed corners and long straights, coupled with notable elevation changes, makes Spa-Francorchamps a true power circuit with engine performance making a significant contribution to lap time.”

What Cosworth don't mention is the effect of the region's topography on engine output. While many tracks offer gentle undulations, at Spa the cars are pushed up the hills at Eau Rouge, Radillon, and the Kemmel Straight by their power units. It's not until Turn 5 that the engines can take a break from all that uphill effort, and it's not a break in any sense of the word that you or I would understand. The undulations just keep on coming.

Fernando Alonso once described the legendary Eau Rouge in a poetic fashion: “You come into the corner downhill, have a sudden change [of direction] at the bottom and then go very steep uphill. From the cockpit, you cannot see the exit and as you come over the crest, you don't know where you will land. It is a crucial corner for the timed lap, and also in the race, because you have a long uphill straight afterwards where you can lose a lot of time if you make a mistake. But it is also an important corner for the driver's feeling. It makes a special impression every lap, because you also have a compression in your body as you go through the bottom of the corner. It is very strange – but good fun as well.”

As a high-speed circuit, it shouldn't surprise you to learn that teams opt for a low-ish downforce setting in Spa. Not quite as low as the all-power Monza, but getting there. According to Renault, the rear-wing configuration will be similar to – if not identical to – that used in Montreal two months ago.

Other teams disagree, and opt for a low-downforce setting while gambling on the weather.

But despite it being medium-to-low downforce, getting the set-up right isn't quite as easy as it sounds. One of the problems is Eau Rouge, Team Lotus explain.

“For the engineers the corner presents a unique problem – the car has to be set up to deal with the huge compression it is put under at high speed through the bottom of the corner, but without compromising the overall balance by running too stiff or too high in static ride height which would penalise the rest of the lap time,” the team wrote in a pre-race press release.

“Throughout the race, and particularly at the start, the sight of the cars screaming down from T2 into Eau Rouge, twitching as they go through the corner and then the invisible hand of downforce squeezing them into the track as they come through T4 and onto the Kemmel Straight is what is, for many fans, the essence of F1.”

Understeer can be a problem at Spa, so teams often compensate with massive front wings (more wing than usual, anyway) to try and minimise the effect on their cars.

When it comes to tyres, Spa will be an all-new experience for Pirelli, who have not tested any of their compounds at the Belgian circuit. The Italian

tyre manufacturer has gone into depth with their race preview, and supplied a lot of tyre analysis.

According to their press release, Spa “is one of the places that puts the highest vertical and lateral loadings on the tyres all year. The length of the lap also accentuates the time difference between the two compounds, which is likely to be more than one second per lap, enhancing the importance of a good strategy. Nonetheless, tyre wear is generally quite low, owing to the cool conditions and flowing nature of the track, with fewer sharp corners than at most other circuits.

“The significant compressions at the Spa-Francorchamps circuit, such as the one at the bottom of Eau Rouge, put heavy demands on the tyres and means that maintaining the correct tyre pressure is very important. When the tyres are given to the teams the pressure is in the region of 18-20 psi, but it can rise rapidly as the tyre heats up and reduce grip. This makes it even more important for the drivers not to work the tyres too hard. Around half of the suspension movement of a Formula 1 car comes from the tyres deflecting, and at Spa the cars are set-up for the widest suspension travel possible, with soft settings. This also necessitates higher ground clearance than at most circuits.”

Finally, the DRS is likely to play an important role in the outcome of the Belgian Grand Prix. Spa is a track that encourages outbraking and overtaking, and judicious application of the DRS should line cars up to attempt ballsy manoeuvres.

The FIA are currently trying to decide whether or not to ban drivers from using the DRS on Eau Rouge during practice and qualifying. They were last banned from using the device at Monaco, when it was decided it would be too dangerous if used inside the tunnel.

For the race itself, the DRS detection zone has been set as 235 metres before Eau Rouge, while the activation zone comes 270 metres after F1's most famous corner.

The current configuration of the Spa-Francorchamps Circuit has been in use since 2007, when the main straight was extended and the Bus Stop chicane modified, and measures 7.004km. Presuming it runs for the full distance, the Belgian Grand Prix will last for 44 laps, bringing the total distance run to 308.052 kilometres.

The group of past Spa winners – on this track configuration – currently racing in F1 is tiny: Lewis Hamilton (2010) and Felipe Massa (2008). Kimi Raikkonen was always known as the King of Spa, and he won the race in 2007 and 2009, having also collected two victories on the previous configuration.

The group of previous pole sitters is equally small: Mark Webber (2010) and Lewis Hamilton (2008). Kimi Raikkonen claimed pole in 2007, while Giancarlo Fisichella pulled a surprise pole out of the bag in 2009.

Fastest laps in Spa have been claimed by Lewis Hamilton (2010), Sebastian Vettel (2009), and Felipe Massa (2007), with Kimi Raikkonen taking the honours in 2008.

The current lap record at the Spa-Francorchamps track is Sebastian Vettel's 2009 time of 1:47.263s, set at an average speed of 235.071kph.

F1 Belgium Blog – Thursday press conference in Spa

It's the Thursday drivers' press conference in Spa, and all anyone wants to talk about is the past two decades of a certain German's life.

Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso), Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin), Vitaly Petrov (Renault), Michael Schumacher (Mercedes), Bruno Senna (Renault), and Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) were there to face the music.

But the first man to feel the glare of the spotlight is returning racer Bruno Senna, who has just supplanted Nick Heidfeld at Renault. Surprising no one, he was asked how he felt about the opportunity.

“It is going to be a big challenge to come back into the middle of the season – or a bit later than the middle of the season – into racing but I have been participating in all the meetings with the engineers so I have been very much up to date with what is going on in the team,” the young Brazilian said.

“The Friday in Hungary was very useful for me to get a feel for the car and get a feel for how the car can go. But, of course, it is going to be a big uphill battle to get up to the level of these guys who have been racing for 11 races now. The fact that it is here, in Spa, is very special. It is my favourite circuit and a circuit that historically I have done very well on so I am really looking forward to it. I hope I can progress fast and hopefully do a good job for these guys because it is the best way to appreciate the opportunity that they are giving me.”

Senna was careful to manage expectations of his performance this weekend.

“It is hard to say [how I will perform]”, he said. “Friday was very tough, Friday in Hungary was really, really difficult but again I only had one set of tyres. I know I will be having to learn how to deal with the tyres from the first set all the way to the sets in qualifying and then again learning how to deal with the tyres for the race as that will be my first experience with the Pirelli tyres on high fuel going to low fuel. All this experience I don't have so if I can be anywhere near Petrov that would be a good reference.”

The one thing Senna couldn't tell us was whether or not he'd be in till the season finale in Sao Paulo, his home grand prix.

“I'm confirmed for this race and the next race but, for some legal issues still to be resolved, they can't confirm the rest of the year or not,” Senna explained. “The intentions are that I do it but it still cannot be confirmed.”

The Schumacher love-in got a bit repetitive, but the highlight was the driver's own reflections on his long career in Formula 1.

"I guess in every person's career, you look at it and you think well, what has happened, you take a summary, you almost make an account and I have to say in my case, taking the 20 years, taking everything that I've been doing... certainly, going backwards, I would do certain things differently, but then in life you have to make some mistakes in order to understand it is a mistake and to sort of set your guidelines and, all in all, I guess the vest that I'm wearing, that I'm wearing inside me, is pretty white, and I'm pretty happy about this. I don't have many regrets and overall, I certainly feel very excited and proud of what has happened," he said long-windedly.

But as a super-fit F1 driver, Schumacher wasn't short of breath at the end of his run-on speech. When not reflecting on the bad times, the seven-time world champion showed a charming – and unexpected – insecurity when he spoke of his early days in Formula 1.

"If you are not a Formula 1 driver – at least [for] myself – I was doubtful whether my quality was good enough to compete with these guys," he said.

"You see them as untouchables, especially in those moments where you had Senna, Prost, Mansell, and so on. I didn't really think I could match [them]. Getting the first experience, coming over here and driving the car, I sort of quickly picked up the confidence that it was possible and from there on we all know. At the end of the day we are all humans, we all have limits and you drive within those and there is no reason why it is impossible to beat those guys in the past and neither these guys that are here right now. That's the good thing about Formula 1. It is always a challenge and it is always a motivating challenge that is great fun."

Sebastien Buemi was asked to go into his team's pre-race efforts to improve the car after a successful race in Hungary.

"We have been working really hard with the team to try and improve the car as much as possible," the Swiss driver said. "I would say the last race in Budapest was really good for us as we finished eighth and tenth so we scored a lot of points for the team. Hopefully now we can have a good weekend as well. We know in Spa everything is possible with the weather and also that can change really quickly. I think we have got some new stuff on the car which will help us as well so hopefully we will be able to use the maximum out of it and score points again."

Virgin's Jerome D'Ambrosio was looking forward to his first experience of a home grand prix.

"It is something special to be here definitely," he said. "For 17 years there were no Belgian drivers in F1 and Spa so coming back here is special. I felt it.

"I'm biased here, but it's the best circuit in the world," D'Ambrosio continued. "The only circuit that I can compare it with is Suzuka really. They are the two circuits in the world that stand up above the others. The pleasure you get to drive a qualifying lap here and during the race... I can't remember any race at Spa being boring, because of the lack of overtaking or anything. The fight with Mika and Michael at the end of the straight and then last year's rain – there's always something nice happening here so I wish that the circuit remains on the calendar for a long long time. As long as I'm in F1, I wish that every year I can drive on the track as it's my home circuit so it's also nice from that point of view."

One man who is under pressure this weekend is championship leader Sebastian Vettel, who has not won a race since Valencia in late June.

"It is not our favourite circuit as there are a lot of straights here, more than on most of the other tracks," the Red Bull driver said. "There are some corners but they are all in sector two, so sector one and three is quite difficult. We have seen that in the past but I think generally we had a very good car around here, the last two years especially so I am looking forward. It is a very nice track all in all and looking forward to the weekend. The last couple of races we know we might not have been on the top of our game but I think we have understood, learnt quite a lot so we will see where we are this weekend."

While Spa is not Red Bull's ideal circuit, Vettel was worried that the historic track might soon disappear from the calendar.

"I think it would be a shame [if we lost this circuit], because there's a lot of history here," the defending world champion said. "Michael is the best example; Formula 1 has been here for a long, long time and I think it would be a shame to lose a circuit like that. Spa has made massive improvements for safety in the last few years. It fully deserves, from a driver's point of view, to remain in the calendar for a longer time than all of us may be racing in Formula 1."

F1 Belgium Blog – F1 in Spa

It's finally happened. Michael Schumacher has got his form back, and Mercedes are top of the timesheets with an unassailable 8 second lead. Umm, not really.

Well, Schumacher is top of the pops, there's no denying that. But the Mercedes pair were the only drivers to complete timed laps before the heavens opened and animals started pairing up in search of Noah. Still, it's a nice way for the seven-time world champion to celebrate the 20th anniversary of his F1 debut.

The torrential rains mean that the times set this morning aren't representative of anything. Some aerodynamic work could be completed in the wet conditions, but pace-setting is little more than a pipe dream.

So what happened this morning in Spa, other than the variable weather for which the track is known?

Two biggish offs, one red flag, and a partridge in a pear tree.

First to fall was Bruno Senna, who did exactly what he'd hoped to avoid in his first outing as a Renault race driver. The Brazilian driver smacked his car into the tyre wall just past Rivage. It was a minor crash, and Senna escaped unscathed, but the marshals had to load his car onto the customary truck by crane.

That loading would hardly be worth the mention were it not for the fact that Senna's use of the crane led to the session being red-flagged when Paul

di Resta smacked his Force India into the same tyre wall. As the crane was already in use, race control brought the session to a halt until di Resta's car could be cleared from the track.

Other than the Rivage dramas, there was very little to report. Some drivers span, some aqua-planed, and the only way we can hope to get a realistic form guide this weekend is if the weather holds off for a minute or two...

FP1 timings (unofficial)

1. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.54.355s [13 laps]
2. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.54.829s [15 laps]
3. Jenson Button (McLaren) 2.02.740s [8 laps]
4. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 2.03.752s [10 laps]
5. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 2.04.301s [7 laps]
6. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 2.04.663s [18 laps]
7. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 2.04.728s [10 laps]
8. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 2.05.391s [12 laps]
9. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 2.06.583s [16 laps]
10. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 2.06.886s [15 laps]
11. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 2.07.055s [12 laps]
12. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 2.07.481s [15 laps]
13. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 2.08.233s [14 laps]
14. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) 2.08.239s [14 laps]
15. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 2.08.918s [10 laps]
16. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 2.09.792s [8 laps]
17. Timo Glock (Virgin) 2.12.278s [13 laps]
18. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) 2.12.389s [10 laps]
19. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 2.12.772s [13 laps]
20. Paul di Resta (Force India) 2.13.058s [8 laps]
21. Karun Chandhok (Lotus) 2.13.090s [11 laps]
22. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 2.13.601s [10 laps]
23. Bruno Senna (Renault) 2.14.340s [7 laps]
24. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) 2.14.933s [11 laps]

F1 Belgium Blog – FP2 at Spa

By the time the heavens opened with 36 minutes remaining of the Friday afternoon practice session at Spa-Francorchamps, the timesheets were a foregone conclusion.

Dry running had been in short order all day, and drivers began the afternoon session by gingerly picking their way around a damp but drying track. Lap times were unimpressive – in the region of two minutes – but excused by the weather.

The 'will it, won't it?' drizzle was just heavy enough to keep the track wet, while still light enough to make umbrellas an optional paddock accessory.

Before the rains fell, Fernando Alonso took a gamble on slicks and jumped straight to the top of the charts, prompting a run to the pits for fresh rubber as all and sundry attempted to capitalise on the drying track before the predicted rain ruined everyone's plans.

Mark Webber was the last man to set a quick time before the torrents arrived, and it was immediately obvious that his pace-setting time of 1.50.321s would not be beaten this afternoon.

The early highlight of the session came via Bruno Senna, who spent milliseconds on top of the timesheets in what was only his second practice session as a race driver for Renault. Senna lost the coveted top spot and slid down to P17, but the silver lining to that cloud was teammate Vitaly Petrov's P24 – Senna answered the doubters who said he was incapable of filling Nick Heidfeld's shoes.

Once the drivers returned to the track with around 15 minutes remaining of FP2, conditions were too wet for anything other than the most basic set-up work and aerodynamic analysis.

Teams were concerned about their wet tyre allocation for the weekend – as many sets as possible for a Spa Sunday is the rule of thumb – which was another contributing factor to the reduced running time this afternoon.

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.50.321s [22 laps]
2. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.50.461s [18 laps]
3. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.50.770s [9 laps]
4. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.50.838s [9 laps]
5. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.51.218s [14 laps]
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.51.242s [22 laps]
7. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.51.655s [20 laps]
8. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.51.725s [17 laps]
9. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.51.751s [8 laps]

10. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.51.790s [13 laps]
 11. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.51.922s [22 laps]
 12. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.52.750s [20 laps]
 13. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.52.780s [25 laps]
 14. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1.52.911s [24 laps]
 15. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1.53.009s [24 laps]
 16. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1.53.156s [17 laps]
 17. Bruno Senna (Renault) 1.53.835s [20 laps]
 18. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1.55.051s [20 laps]
 19. Timo Glock (Virgin) 1.55.494s [22 laps]
 20. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1.56.202s [15 laps]
 21. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 1.56.816s [20 laps]
 22. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) 1.57.450s [19 laps]
 23. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) 1.57.612s [24 laps]
 24. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 2.02.234s [12 laps]
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F1 Belgium Blog – FP3 in Spa

Timing, as they say, is everything. And in a sport where times are what counts, it's hardly surprising that timing influenced the FP3 lap times at the Spa-Francorchamps Circuit on Saturday afternoon.

The final practice session is shorter than Friday's two, and lasts for only an hour. So when torrential rains began to fall – again – as the session got underway, journalists spent what felt like months staring at blank timing screens in the press room as the drivers hid in the pits and waited for conditions to improve.

When the time came for the bravest to get out on track and start lapping the circuit, tyres were an immediate concern. The FIA's strict rules on tyre allocation work fine at the dryer tracks, but in a country like Belgium, where rain is a certainty, the lack of inters means that strategists keep their men off track for as much time as possible in order to save the inters for when it really counts – Sunday's race.

Ferrari were a case in point. While the tifosi might have sobbed into their espressos when they learned their boys were bottom of the list this morning, Fernando Alonso did not set a timed lap, and Felipe Massa focused on saving rubber, not trouncing the competition. The Scuderia's morning was not representative of the team's potential this weekend.

Fastest man of the morning was birthday boy and Red Bull driver Mark Webber, who thanked the team for his contract extension with a pace-setting time. It says a lot about the rain that his best time was an unimpressive 2.08.988s, nearly 20 seconds shy of the best time set on Friday afternoon in better conditions.

Bruno Senna briefly topped the timesheets this morning. The Brazilian driver continues to impress in his first weekend for Renault, and he appears to be in with a good chance of a top ten qualifying time this afternoon.

A quick look at the times set this morning shows the importance of timing your pit exit. Jaime Alguersuari's P3 was a good result for the Toro Rosso driver, but not representative of the car's true pace. It is not a McLaren or Red Bull beater, yet he sits atop of Jenson Button and Sebastian Vettel in the standings.

Another man to benefit from a well-timed lap was Heikki Kovalainen, who finished the morning in an impressive P12.

Should these conditions persist into the afternoon – and qualifying is expected to be run in the wet – we could see a shake-up in the session that will lead to a chaotic grid and a thrilling race.

FP3 times (unofficial)

1. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 2.08.988s [7 laps]
2. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 2.09.046s [8 laps]
3. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 2.09.931s [16 laps]
4. Jenson Button (McLaren) 2.10.257s [7 laps]
5. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 2.10.402s [9 laps]
6. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) 2.10.580s [15 laps]
7. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 2.10.837s [12 laps]
8. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 2.11.437s [13 laps]
9. Bruno Senna (Renault) 2.11.664s [14 laps]
10. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 2.11.667s [10 laps]
11. Paul di Resta (Force India) 2.11.874s [13 laps]
12. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 2.13.036s [15 laps]
13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 2.13.074s [12 laps]
14. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 2.13.182s [12 laps]
15. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 2.13.290s [15 laps]
16. Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 2.13.778s [12 laps]
17. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 2.14.334s [14 laps]
18. Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 2.14.682s [11 laps]
19. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin) 2.17.159s [12 laps]

20. Timo Glock (Virgin) 2.18.039s [10 laps]
 21. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) 2.19.001 [12 laps]
 22. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) 2.19.597s [14 laps]
 23. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 2.22.454s [7 laps]
 24. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) NO TIME SET [5 laps]
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F1 Belgium Blog – Q1 at Spa

Unbelievably, qualifying started under a bright sunny sky in Spa, but half the track appears to be very wet. Situation normal for Belgium, then.

The session started with a bang for Michael Schumacher, who lost a wheel and crashed into the wall on his out lap. Not the best way to celebrate 20 years in Formula 1. I can't imagine he'll be in a great mood at Mercedes' special party this afternoon.

The early times are indicative of the bizarre conditions on track; Lewis Hamilton was an early pace-setter for McLaren, with a 2.09.506s, roughly three seconds faster than his teammate. Sebastian Vettel was visibly wrestling with his car in the corners – it's not an easy run for anyone.

Rain is expected within ten minutes, so the track should soon fill up as drivers set a banker with a view to making it through to the next session before conditions become impossible.

Times at the top keep changing, as they tend to do, while neither HRT driver has set a timed lap at the session's mid-point.

Mark Webber is currently top of the timesheets, leading Jenson Button and Sebastian Vettel. Hamilton's earlier time no longer sees the McLaren driver safely through to Q2, and the Brit is out on track aiming to improve.

And improve he does, with a 2.04.240s that puts him in P1.

In the dropout zone with just over seven minutes remaining are Vitaly Petrov, Sergio Perez, Jerome D'Ambrosio, Timo Glock, Tonio Liuzzi, and Daniel Ricciardo. Schumacher is out, and P24 belongs to the German seven-time champion.

Button bests his teammate by three-tenths, and lap times continue to fall on the drying track. Make the most of it, boys! And Hamilton does, going fastest with a 2.03.008s.

Bruno Senna goes fifth with a 2.05.047s, and continues to impress all and sundry.

The 107 percent time could prove critical today – as I type, D'Ambrosio, Glock, Liuzzi, Ricciardo, and Schumacher are all outside the required 2.10.339s (although that time changes with each improved lap).

Button is fastest with a 2.01.813s.

Heikki Kovalainen, Jarno Trulli, D'Ambrosio, Ricciardo, Liuzzi, Glock, and Schumacher are all in the dropout zone. There are just under three minutes remaining.

Webber goes second with a 2.02.827s, and rain is now falling outside the press room. Conditions are looking ghastly out on track, and times are not going to improve.

D'Ambrosio, Liuzzi, Ricciardo, and Schumacher are all outside the 107 percent time of 2.10.339s, while the dropout zone is comprised of Paul di Resta, Jarno Trulli, Timo Glock, Jerome D'Ambrosio, Tonio Liuzzi, Daniel Ricciardo, and Michael Schumacher.

Dropout zone

18. Paul di Resta (Force India)
 19. Jarno Trulli (Lotus)
 20. Timo Glock (Virgin)
 21. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin)
 22. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT)
 23. Daniel Ricciardo (HRT)
 24. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
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F1 Belgium Blog – Q2 at Spa

After an ignominious early departure for Michael Schumacher, Q1 saw the departure of both HRTs, both Virgins, Jarno Trulli, and Paul di Resta.

Four drivers fell short of the 107 percent rule – Jerome D'Ambrosio, Tonio Liuzzi, Daniel Ricciardo, and Schumacher, whose first lap crash left him unable to set a time.

As Q2 got underway, rain continued to fall at the Spa-Francorchamps racetrack, meaning that the times set in this wet session will be less impressive than the early times set in Q1.

Set-up is a gamble today – current weather forecasts predict a dry race, and teams have to find the balance between a car that works in qualifying and car that will cope with what will probably turn out to be variable conditions tomorrow. Despite the weather forecast, rain during the Belgian Grand Prix is enshrined in F1 law. Or should that be lore?

The Red Bulls and McLarens have claimed the top four spots on the timesheets, with Adrian Sutil and Fernando Alonso just behind.

And as I typed that, Adrian Sutil retired from the session when he lost it on a kerb, smacked into the wall at the top of Eau Rouge, and took his wheel off. The session has been red flagged while they clear the track of debris.

When the red flags fell, the dropout zone was comprised of Fernando Alonso, Sergio Perez, Rubens Barrichello, Kamui Kobayashi, Pastor Maldonado, and Heikki Kovalainen.

Fastest man on track is Mark Webber, with a 2.06.644s. The Red Bull driver leads his teammate, Jenson Button, Lewis Hamilton, and the beleaguered Sutil.

When the session restarted there was barely enough time for an outlap and a flyer. The pressure is on, and the drivers have to push if they're to be in with a chance of a top-ten slot on tomorrow's grid. The falling rain only makes the job harder.

Times at the top changed insanely quickly – inside the space of ten seconds we had five different men at the top of the timesheets.

Lewis Hamilton is not on the cusp of the dropout zone, but the British driver is on a flyer and could yet save his skin. And despite traffic, the British driver goes fastest as the chequered flag falls.

And the yellow flags are out, thanks to an unidentified incident. Times can't improve or drivers will get a slap on the wrist for breaking the rules. Or maybe the yellows were erroneous, as there's no explanation on the timing screens.

Alonso goes fastest.

And after the session, on a replay, it becomes obvious that Pastor Maldonado attempted to drive Hamilton off the road by the old pits. Expect some major penalties for that – it's dangerous driving and then some, especially in these conditions.

With the session finished, the dropout zone is comprised of Sebastien Buemi, Kamui Kobayashi, Jenson Button, Rubens Barrichello, Adrian Sutil, Pastor Maldonado, and Heikki Kovalainen.

Dropout zone

11. Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso)
12. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
13. Jenson Button (McLaren)
14. Rubens Barrichello (Williams)
15. Adrian Sutil (Force India)
16. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)
17. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus)

F1 Belgium Blog – Q3 at Spa

Pastor Maldonado's deliberate crash into Lewis Hamilton at the end of Q2 is the talk of the press room. The general consensus is that the Williams driver should be disqualified from the weekend, if not from the season. Dangerous driving cannot be tolerated.

Hamilton managed to escape from the incident unscathed, and the McLaren driver is currently out on track, fighting for pole.

It's looking like a Red Bull walkover for the moment, with Mark Webber leading teammate Sebastian Vettel by two seconds. Hamilton is currently in P3, but as I typed that the McLaren driver went up to P2.

And as I typed that, Vettel bested them both for provisional pole.

Bruno Senna made it through to Q3 in his first qualifying session as a Renault driver, and has bested his teammate who is currently sitting in P10, five seconds off the pace.

Jaime Alguersuari has pulled out a 1.51.232s, which is currently good enough for P4.

Hamilton goes purple in the first sector, and takes provisional pole from the Red Bull pair milliseconds before Vettel snatches it by half a second.

Felipe Massa has taken P4 from Alguersuari, while teammate Fernando Alonso languishes in P7, behind Senna.

Rosberg crosses the line in P5, pushing Alonso down in P8.

Sebastian Vettel is on pole, sharing the front row with Lewis Hamilton. Behind them are Mark Webber and Felipe Massa.

Provisional grid

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

* D'Ambrosio, Liuzzi, Ricciardo, and Schumacher failed to lap within the 107 percent time set in Q1, and will need to apply for permission to race tomorrow.

F1 Belgium Blog – Saturday press conference in Spa

Sebastian Vettel scored his umpteenth pole of the season, but that's old news – we've come to expect it. The real story in the post-qualifying press conference was the incident between Pastor Maldonado and Lewis Hamilton.

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

As Hamilton was involved in the incident and hadn't seen any footage at the time of the press conference, he wasn't entirely sure what had happened.

"I will have to look at [the incident] afterwards," he said. "I was at the end of my Q2 lap and I got to the chicane as I was just finishing and there were two Williams just sitting there, going very, very slow. I think they were probably preparing for the start of another lap but it was already a red light. I had to try and get past, which I did. I lost quite a lot of time there but as I was coming through the exit of turn one I saw Maldonado approaching quite quickly. He came around me and I didn't move anywhere but he happened to swipe across me. I don't know whether it was intentional or not. I guess we will see shortly. I just said I am just going to sit here and wait for the stewards to call me up rather than go back down to the [McLaren] Brand Centre.

"When you're in the car you have to really get out and have a look," Hamilton continued. "I can't really recollect absolutely everything that went on but it did feel quite a hard thump. I thought that my tracking was broken so I thought the front wheel and suspension was broken. It went very, very light for the rest of the lap, and I felt a big shove in the side of the car from the wheel, and I think the front wing was gone. I think it was quite serious and quite fortunate that neither of us and particularly him was flipped or had a big, big crash, so I think we were quite lucky there.

Asked about possible damage to the car, the McLaren driver replied: "The front wing was quite badly damaged – my sidepod, and I thought my front suspension was damaged. I think the front toe-in is probably a little bit out, but fortunately the guys did a great job to put it back together. I just think once the flag is out and the red lights are on there is no need to be racing and there should never ever be an incident and unfortunately there was."

Vettel provided an illuminating insight into the vagaries of car set-up in varying conditions.

"To be totally frank these days there is not really a wet set-up anymore," the defending world champion explained.

"It is difficult, as from Saturday to Sunday you are not allowed to change anything. There are a couple of things that yes, if you could guarantee 100 per cent wet running, you would go for it, but it is not a massive change anyway. As I said yesterday and this morning, I wasn't really happy but in qualifying, and then especially Q2, we seemed to pick up the pace, also in the wet. Yes, it was drying but also in those places where it was still damp I think for the first time this weekend we were very competitive. All in all, a bit last-minute. It is not easy when you don't run that much but we got it back."

Hamilton agreed with his opponent.

"Nowadays there's not really a big difference between dry and wet set-up," he reiterated. "I think in the past and in other categories you softened the car a lot more. As you go into qualifying nowadays, you can't change between qualifying and the race and so you have to try and... the set-up is generally very, very similar from dry to wet.

“It’s just about trying to find the correct balance,” the McLaren driver continued. “You can take off all your downforce and have good end-of-straight speed, but then you struggle in the middle sector. It’s just about making the compromise. It was still wet – we don’t know what the weather’s going to do tomorrow even though it says it’s dry, so we didn’t fully go for the optimal downforce level for the dry but I think tomorrow will still be dry.”

And with set-up on the agenda, talk turned to tyres and expected levels of degradation given the general lack of running in the dry this weekend.

“It will be very important tomorrow, unknown tyre degradation,” Vettel said. “Obviously you get an impression after a couple of laps. Yesterday, in my case, I didn’t run the soft tyre, I ran a little bit longer on the hard compound. Today, I had a couple of laps on the soft compound. It’s very hard to draw conclusions so I think we will find out tomorrow. It’s not a secret, I think that’s why most of the people were using the soft tyres in qualifying, because they are the faster tyre so we will try to use that as much as we can, similar to the last couple of races.

“It is a shame these days to be honest, that on Fridays we only run only one set of inters, as that one is free,” the German driver continued. “The rest of the tyres, we don’t want to touch if the weather forecast is likely to rain, which it did today and maybe tomorrow again, so you try to save tyres, which is a shame for the people and for all of us, as it is boring when you sit in the garage waiting doing nothing instead of having practice. It is not that we don’t like running here, even if it rains, it is just we want to save the tyres for the reasons we saw in qualifying. You might need any set and also for tomorrow. It is the same for everyone.”

In the course of the press conference, Webber let slip that this morning’s contract extension announcement was actually old news as far as he was concerned – he and Red Bull signed their latest deal in Budapest.

The exchange has been copied in full below, for context.

Q: Mark, by my count, it’s four years in a row that you’ve signed a one-year extension at Red Bull. Is it the team or yourself that’s reluctant to commit to a multi-year deal and as well, could you tell us when you put pen to paper for 2012?

MW: Signed not long ago, I think it was the last race, actually, on the Sunday. Little bit of both, I think. The one-year extensions are not too bad for me, and also I think it suits them as well. Bit of fifty-fifty.

Finally, Webber waxed lyrical about Spa.

“It’s a beautiful track,” he said. “We all love driving here, wish there was more of them. Obviously the tracks they design these days are obviously trying for more TV and set up for the grandstands, second and third gear stuff which is not really that exciting, but you could drive round here every day of the week. It’s a beautiful track and one that, whether you’re a journo, a photographer, a driver, whatever, fan, you love coming here.”

F1 Belgium Blog – The Belgian Grand Prix as it happened

Something is very, very wrong. We’re in Spa, the race is about to start, and nary a drop of rain has fallen all day.

The big pre-race story is about blistering tyres. Red Bull, McLaren, and Toro Rosso opted for extreme camber settings that led to serious blisters, which the affected teams thought was dangerous enough that they should be allowed fresh rubber.

Pirelli duly flew in extra sets of the soft compound, but the FIA told teams that any changes to tyres or camber set-ups would lead to a pitlane start. As a result, Lewis Hamilton, Mark Webber, Sebastian Vettel, are likely to pit early for the medium compound.

And they’re off!

Rosberg got a stunning start and is leading the race. Vettel holds onto P2, Massa passes Hamilton, Webber drops back by miles and Alonso jumps up to P5 after running very wide at La Source. Good lord.

Senna’s good qualifying didn’t lead to a good start – the Brazilian is already down in P14.

Alguersuari appears to have broken suspension, and is now down in P24. On the replays, it becomes obvious he was hit by Senna. Alonso got tapped in the incident, but emerged unscathed.

There was non-stop carnage in the middle and back of the pack as a result of the Senna-Alguersuari crash, with Glock running into a Force India. Both Lotuses got caught up in the chaos.

Alonso makes it past Hamilton on lap 2, just as the yellow flags come out for a stopped Alguersuari.

Lap 3 and Rosberg is still in the lead, making the most of his unblistered tyres. But as I type Vettel gets past for P1. The top three cars – Vettel, Rosberg, and Massa – are split by less than a second.

Webber and Button pit on lap 4. Lap 5, and the track is still under yellows.

At the front of the pack, Rosberg is slowing down Massa and Alonso, making Vettel’s job easier.

Alonso passes Massa for P3; seconds later Hamilton gets past the Brazilian and takes up position in P4. It looks as though the two Ferraris touched, but Massa and Hamilton definitely made contact when the Brit got past.

Vettel pits from the lead on lap 6 and takes on new softs. Rosberg reclaims the lead.

Buemi has had the black and orange flag waved at him, while Senna's been issued with a drive-through penalty for causing the Alguersuari collision. Glock's also been issued with a drive-through for his own collision with a Force India.

Alonso is 0.2s behind Rosberg, with Hamilton 0.6s behind.

Glock pits for his penalty on lap 7.

Alonso passes Rosberg for the lead, and Hamilton is now trying to get past the Mercedes. Massa is 0.7s behind Hamilton, and it's a close-fought fight at the front of the pack.

Vettel is up in P6 after his pitstop and a pass on Petrov, with Kobayashi 0.7s ahead. The Red Bull driver has just posted the fastest lap and managed a pass on the Sauber driver, putting him up into P5.

Lap 8 and Alonso pits from the lead, handing the lead to Hamilton. The Ferrari driver comes back out in P8, just ahead of Webber. But the Australian isn't having anything of the sort, and sweeps neatly past for P8.

Buemi has retired, although I missed the cause. That's both Toro Rossos out of the Belgian Grand Prix.

Massa pits on lap 9 and Vettel is back up to P3, 1s behind Rosberg and 3.6s behind Hamilton, who is still on his original rubber.

Alonso's now up to P7, fighting Webber for P6. Sutil briefly split the pair, but Alonso got past in what was a very close shave between the Force India's front wing and the Ferrari's front left tyre.

Lap 10 and Hamilton pits from the lead, emerging in P8. Vettel made a beautiful move on Rosberg just before the McLaren driver's stop, and inherited the lead as a result.

Alonso gets past Webber – he is taking down drivers like Christmas decorations on 6 January.

Rosberg puts from P3 on lap 11 as Alonso goes purple. This is one chaotic race, as was widely predicted. Hamilton, who is in the middle of traffic, has been told to go easy on his tyres.

Hamilton got two drivers on the last lap – Sutil and Petrov – and is currently running in P5. As I typed, he passed Kobayashi for P4.

But it was not to be – Hamilton is now out of the race, having crashed dramatically into hoardings and smacking the wall.

The Safety Car has been deployed, causing the traditional run to the pits.

Hamilton's pass on Kobayashi wasn't as smooth as it looked, and the Sauber driver clipped the McLaren's rear end. The British driver span like a top and is out of the race. It wasn't Kobayashi's fault – there wasn't enough room to complete the manoeuvre, and it looks like simple misjudgement on Hamilton's part.

Hamilton appears to be okay, but the Medical Car has just been deployed to bring him back to the medical centre for checks.

Alonso is leading the race behind the Safety Car, with Webber and Vettel behind. Massa is in P4, with Rosberg rounding out the top five.

Lap 16 and Hamilton's car is removed from the track. Race control announce the Safety Car will be called in this lap, so racing can resume on lap 17.

Vettel slips past Webber for P2 within seconds of the racing restarting, and he and Alonso are already pulling out a lead over the Australian. Rosberg passes Massa, while Schumacher gets past both Perez and Petrov for P7.

Alonso and Vettel are dicing side by side on lap 18, and Vettel manages to take and hold the lead. Button is carrying the weight of McLaren's expectations, and manages to get past Perez and Petrov for P8.

In the chaos of the Hamilton accident I missed Ricciardo stopping behind the Safety Car.

Button and Schumacher are now split by 0.4s, and it looks like we'll be in for a battle of the Mercedes engines as they fight for P7. Schumacher's been told to stay on his tyres, with a short run on options at the end. That will make the battle slightly less exciting, when it comes.

The stewards have announced that there will be no further action on the Hamilton-Kobayashi crash. It was obviously a racing incident, and Hamilton penalised himself with the mis-judgement.

Perez has just been issued with a drive-through for causing a collision.

Button made it past Schumacher while the stewards were busy making announcements, and on lap 23 the McLaren driver begins attempting to pass Sutil for P6. He gets past in what looked like a very close shave as Sutil flat-spotted his right rear.

Towards the end of lap 23, Vettel radios to complain of blistering. The Red Bull driver only has 4.4s on Alonso, and is not in a safe position to pit without handing over the lead.

Perez pits for his penalty on lap 24.

Button is closing up on Massa, and we're mere moments from a fight for P5. Lap 25, and the McLaren driver passes the Ferrari and immediately pulls out a 0.5s lead.

Next in Button's sights is Rosberg – the two are split by 0.1s, and the pass is a foregone conclusion. The McLaren driver makes it past and is sitting pretty in P4 on the medium tyre. If he can preserve his tyres as the men ahead pit – Vettel's tyre situation is looking particularly desperate – the win could well be Button's.

Button is eight seconds behind Webber in P3, but has a clear run with no traffic in which to make his approach.

Webber is reducing the gap to Alonso in P2, but Vettel is somehow managing to extend his lead over the Ferrari despite tyres that appear to be falling apart.

Lap 29, and Perez pits for the fourth time. Ah – that wasn't a pitstop, it was a retirement. Meanwhile, Button closes the gap to Webber by another second.

Alonso pits on lap 30, and looks to be wrestling with his car in the pitlane. He emerges, freshly shod with mediums, in P4. Button is ahead of him and Rosberg behind.

Vettel pits from the lead, and emerges in P3. It prompts another run from the chasing pack, most of whom follow the Red Bull driver's lead.

Ferrari are now worried that Button will run to the end of the race on his current tyres.

Webber pits from the lead on lap 31, and Vettel uses his fresh tyres to nip past Button for P1. McLaren learn the lesson and ready themselves for a Button stop on lap 33. The Brit drops from P2 to P4, and is now running softs for his closing stint.

Massa dropped to P11 following a pitstop caused by a punctured tyre. Emerging from the pits, the Ferrari driver nearly lost it before being passed by Kobayashi on his out lap.

Schumacher passes Sutil for P6 on lap 35.

Webber is closing on Alonso, and it's looking like this race is going to be a Red Bull 1-2. Despite his fresh rubber, Button seems to be incapable of closing the gap to the top three.

It's lap 36, and Webber is now less than 1s behind Alonso. He should be perfectly placed for a DRS-powered overtake in the next couple of laps.

Vettel is pulling away from Alonso; he took out 1.5s on the last lap.

Webber gets past the Ferrari driver on lap 38, and that Red Bull 1-2 is now looking like a certainty. Button is around 5 seconds behind Alonso, and could cause an upset on the podium.

The Mercedes pair – who are running in P5 and P6 – have just been told that both cars are free to race. Rosberg and Schumacher are split by 0.7s, and judicious use of DRS seems to be making the front car in any pair a sitting duck this afternoon.

Lap 39, and Button has reduced the gap to Alonso to 3.8s. Schumacher is now 0.6s behind his teammate.

There are five laps remaining, and no change at the front other than reduced margins. Further down the pack, Massa gets past Maldonado for P9. Di Resta in P11 is 3.4s behind the Williams driver, and could yet knock him out of the points.

I think Rosberg was just asked to let Schumacher past. Perfectly legal, of course, just not cricket. Lap 41 – we're on the final countdown now.

Barrichello pits after assaulting Kobayashi, who has been smacked front and rear this afternoon.

Button finally looks to be making a move on Alonso; the gap has reduced to 0.7s. Lap 42, and the McLaren driver claims his spot on the podium.

Schumacher gets past Rosberg – there is a lot of doubt about the pass, which came about as a result of team orders issued to celebrate the elder German's 20th anniversary of his Spa debut. Not really a sign of returning form, just Rosberg rolling over so the team will rub his belly.

Which isn't to denigrate the rest of Schumacher's afternoon – having started in P24, it was an impressive run to P6 on his own merits.

So it's a Red Bull 1-2, with Button in P3. Of course, there's one lap remaining, but it's a foregone conclusion unless anyone crashes out or has an engine go bang.

The only real excitement at the end comes via Massa, who passed Petrov on the final lap. Petrov appears to have run out of fuel, and stopped near the pits.

Race results

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) – 25 points
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) – 18 pts
3. Jenson Button (McLaren) – 15 pts
4. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) – 12 pts
5. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) – 10 pts

6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) – 8 pts
7. Adrian Sutil (Force India) – 6 pts
8. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) – 4 pts
9. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) – 2 pts
10. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) – 1 pt
11. Paul di Resta (Force India)
12. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
13. Bruno Senna (Renault)
14. Jarno Trulli (Lotus)
15. Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus)
16. Rubens Barrichello (Williams)
17. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin)
18. Timo Glock (Virgin)
19. Tonio Liuzzi (HRT)

Sergio Perez (Sauber) RET
Daniel Ricciardo (HRT) RET
Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) RET
Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) RET
Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) RET

F1 Belgium Blog – Sunday press conference in Spa

The post-race press conference at the Belgian Grand Prix featured race winner Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), teammate Mark Webber (Red Bull), and Jenson Button (McLaren). Going into the race, one of the primary concerns was the tyres – in the limited dry running the teams had experienced, blistering was a major problem.

According to Vettel, blistering “was our main concern going into the race. We had reason to be confident. The alternative would have been to change the set-up and start from the pit-lane. Maybe it would have been a completely different race. We took that risk. We had as much confidence as we could get before the race. We had some long discussions straight after qualifying, yesterday night and this morning. Now we are sitting here it all went well and we finished one-two but it wasn’t an easy decision to make and not an easy race especially at the beginning to manage.

“You are driving into the unknown,” the race winner continued. “No-one has really had a lot of laps around here, in particular on Friday with the conditions so everyone was a bit in the same boat. Those 10 cars in qualifying got a little bit of an idea. For some it turned out to be a problem, for others not, but I think with the race now happy no-one suffered any further damage on the tyre. I saw basically that the cars I passed and also people who thought they might not run into any problems they had the same problems as we did so we need to learn from that and see for the next races.”

Webber agreed with his teammate.

“Pretty stressful last night, pretty stressful this morning,” the Australian driver said. “We are not just talking about blisters, we are talking about unknown characteristics of what the tyre might do, so it was handled well from our team’s perspective. Putting the drivers right in the discussions to understand how we could get through grand prix as safe as possible. I was giving them feedback on how the tyres looked. It was a long stint given the misunderstanding with the pit-stop around the safety car, so we had to commit to going very, very long on that set of tyres. I had a very, very big vibration on them, which is not unusual but that cleared up when I put the fresh set on.

“The main thing we were interested in was looking at the fronts on the inside shoulder,” Webber explained. “My set after qualifying were in a very bad way so we had to get rid of those very quickly, but my race was pretty heavily compromised after I got rid of the first clutch at the start and got the anti-stall instantaneously. I thought I’d got passed by about 30 cars but got to turn one and most of them had hit each other, which was good and I came out the other side.”

Vettel was also asked whether he had also suffered a less than stellar start.

“Yeah, big time,” the German driver said. “I think Mark nearly stalled or had to pull the clutch again and I was just about to pull it. Released the clutch and the revs went really low and I thought the engine nearly died. For a moment it was quite, quite critical. I then seemed to recover, caught a lot of wheel slip. I was waiting for Lewis [Hamilton] to get past but I think his start wasn’t very good either. Then there was a bit of trouble into Turn One. Nico was very close. I was taking a very aggressive approach down to Eau Rouge but still it was enough. The tow, today, in general was very powerful so we saw a lot of manoeuvres after Eau Rouge and he was able to take the lead. Yeah, quite busy initially.”

Answering a different set of questions, Webber went into more detail on his poor start before reflecting on his race as a whole.

“The start was shocking,” he said. “Dropped the lever and had anti-stall immediately. I think Seb also had a very close call as well through the anti-stall, so that was a very disappointing way to start the grand prix. On the back foot from there knowing, as Seb said, that we were going to stop pretty early, as our tyres were badly damaged after qualifying, so we needed to get rid of that set quite early. When I was back in the pack I saw [Bruno] Senna and a few guys in turn one smashing each other up, so it was important to get away from that scene with everything still intact and that was the case.

“We made the first stop, had a bit of a fight with Fernando,” Webber continued. “He had very good grip on the option initially on his stint and then I could stay with him for a very, very long stint on the prime tyre. The tyre was completely finished at the end but that gave us track position back. We had a bit of a stuff-up on the radio. I was supposed to pit when Seb did with the safety car but we had a completely blocked radio. I was asking three times in the Bus Stop, ‘do you want me to stop, do you want me to stop’ and gave them the radio back but I heard nothing. Stayed out, saw Fernando

stayed out, so a little bit of confusion but all in all the way the team handled all the problems we had yesterday, overnight and this morning credit to Adrian [Newey] and all his crew – all the guys on the floor, Christian [Horner] as well. It was not an easy grand prix for those guys on the pit wall today watching the two drivers out there. It was reasonably sensitive for them so in the end we got a good result. I would have loved to have had a normal grand prix but still an enjoyable race and got a good result.”

Meanwhile, Button was pleased to put his Spa demons to rest.

“I think third is my best result here,” the McLaren driver said. “For me, the race was a lot of fun. The first lap was pretty messy, as Mark said, a lot of guys in fifth, sixth, seventh got together and then it was just mayhem for all of us behind, because there were just bits flying everywhere. At turn one, I think Paul [di Resta] or [Adrian] Sutil hit my rear wing so I had half my rear wing endplate missing on one side which isn’t good for downforce. And then as I exited the corner, there were bits flying everywhere.

“Someone’s front wing went through my front wing and ripped one of the mirrors off as well, so it was a pretty messy first lap,” Button continued. “I was radioing to the team saying ‘I’ve got a lot of damage, I need to come in.’ They said ‘you can’t because you will be in so much traffic, just keep pushing.’ I did so for five laps and they said ‘pit and we’ll go to options.’ We ran the option for the rest of the race. The balance was pretty good but there was low grip out there because of the rear wing damage that I had. It was tough but also a lot of fun. Passing people into the last chicane round the outside was very enjoyable but we can always say what could have been if we didn’t have a misunderstanding yesterday – without swearing. Yeah, we’ve had very good pace all weekend; the car’s working very well and I think that, as a team, if we had got everything together, we probably would have had a much better result but this is the way it is. These guys did a better job and we’ve got to look forward to Monza, because we have a very strong package. For me, this is the best the car has felt all year but we didn’t get the best out of it.”

Vettel was asked about the effect of the Safety Car on his eventual win – had it helped him on the tyre front?

“I would say yes and no,” the defending world champion replied. “Obviously, we could get the stop and not lose too much. But on the other hand I think I was six or seven seconds in the lead at the time, so we lost the lead and lost that gap that we had. I don’t think it made a big difference at the end. Fortunately, with the new regulations we have there are very few possibilities that someone gains a big advantage, but all in all, I agree with Jenson: it is good to finish the race and not to crash this year. When I came close to him I was going to target to pass him at the long straight, not into the chicane so just to make sure, but it was a really fun race with plenty of overtaking due to the strategy we both had to go through. A lot of cars we had to overtake, but the car was fantastic, the pace was there and that’s why we are sitting up here now.

“I think that in that regard it helped us as much as it helped other people – Fernando, who was in the lead to give his tyres a break, which allowed him to make his set last longer,” Vettel continued. “I think it was the same, in a way. Obviously I was able to conserve the peak of the tyre and use it a bit longer afterwards but as I say, others gained some advantage and could cool down the tyres a bit as well. Yes, pretty scary to go around with blistering issues. Obviously, after a while... in qualifying we couldn’t really see it from the inside of the car but in the race we definitely could. It’s not very comfortable, especially on the way down to Eau Rouge and then through Blanchimont, when you really look at the tyre and it doesn’t look like being in great shape. You feel quite a lot of vibrations. If you ask anybody on the grid, we all suffered the same kind of problems. As I said, I followed Nico at some stage at the end of his first stint and he had the same problem on the front left. Science, but it’s not really the idea, because it’s driving into the unknown and it’s not comfortable for us, because in the end we sit in the car. That’s one of the main things we were thinking about before going into the race.”

Asked whether he thought the drivers’ title was now his, Vettel refused to be drawn.

“I’ve got more points than after the last race,” Vettel said. “Of course I’m very happy with today’s result and I know that it’s very important to finish ahead of those guys and anybody else, so it brought us closer to our final target, but it’s still a long way and if you just look at last year, yes, by this time it might have been looking different but if you look at how quickly things can change, if you are out in two races and someone else is having a good couple of races, it could change so all we do is try to get the optimum every time, like today. It was tricky race, as I said, for tyre management but when the chance is there to win, we go for it.

“When I was driving around, passing people around the outside here and there, then I don’t think about the Championship. If I think there’s room to overtake, I go for it. If the risk is too high, then naturally I think you shouldn’t do it. I think I’ve done it in the past when it didn’t work, as Jenson can tell you, so it’s not necessary to take that risk.”

Finally, Webber was congratulated for his stunning move on Alonso. The exchange has been copied in full below.

Q. Congratulations for providing a really thrilling race today and I think you all had some very exciting passes, but the one that I think got our imagination going was Mark going down the hill, no DRS and taking it straight to Alonso. Could you tell us about that and whether it was just a moment’s inspiration or had you calculated it all?

MW: Well, you don’t have much time to get the calculator out at that point, mate, so I think most of the race I was still charged with frustration from the start, so when I came out behind Fernando, obviously we were very, very close going down into Eau Rouge and I knew Fernando would have been using some KERS so I was using some KERS as well. I got a tow, obviously, and then I thought if I can get to the inside then I might have the line but obviously both of us are very experienced, we both don’t give much too easily, so it was a good battle and very, very rewarding that it worked out OK, but it takes two guys doing a good job to get all that right obviously, so it’s more rewarding when you can do it with someone like Fernando because he’s a world-class driver and he knows when enough is enough. Obviously my attitude might have been a bit different with someone else, let’s say, but in the end, it worked out for me today but in Monza, maybe it’s his turn to do it to me. I was breathing in at the bottom, I got in and I looked in the mirror at the top and I saw he was still in... well, he had no choice, obviously in the end he had to... one of us had to lift and I had a slightly better line and it was he who had to lift.

F1 Belgium Blog – Analysing the Belgian Grand Prix

When reviewing the 2011 Belgian Grand Prix, one thing that can be said with little recourse to analysis – it was an absolutely rubbish afternoon for

Toro Rosso, who saw both drivers retire in the opening laps.

Jaime Alguersuari was first out thanks to the traditional first corner carnage, while Sebastien Buemi made it to lap 6 before being called into the pits by the black and orange flags.

After the race, Alguersuari was disappointed at the result of his career-best qualifying.

"I don't want to speak badly about any other driver as it's not my style, but I think the situation was quite clear to everyone," he said. "Going into the hairpin after the start, I was in the middle with Senna on my inside and Fernando on my outside and Senna completely missed his braking point and hit me which pushed me into the path of the Ferrari."

But the Toro Rossos are the easy bit.

The slightly harder bit is looking at the race and what it means for the championship as whole, for that requires a lot of arithmetic.

While Vettel doesn't yet have the championship all sewn up, Sunday's win means that the young German is going to have to try quite hard to lose it. With seven races remaining it's far too complicated to go into all the permutations of possible finishes, but looking at the wins it's going to be a hard one for the Red Bull driver to lose.

With a 113 point lead on Lewis Hamilton and a 110 point lead on Jenson Button, Vettel only needs to finish the remaining races in P5 to seal the deal if either Hamilton or Button wins all seven.

It would be a bit harder to take the championship from either Mark Webber or Fernando Alonso, who are 92 and 102 points behind respectively, but a string of P4s with constant wins for one of his opponents would do the trick.

And if there's one thing Vettel showed us this weekend, it's that he's got a trick or two up his sleeve.

Long lambasted for being unable to deliver anything but a seemingly endless string of lights to flag wins, a mix of overtaking manoeuvres and pitlane strategy saw the defending world champion come back from a poor start to win the race.

Speaking in the post-race press conference, Vettel explained his poor start: "Released the clutch and the revs went really low and I thought the engine nearly died. For a moment it was quite, quite critical. I then seemed to recover, caught a lot of wheel slip."

Early on in the race, Vettel had to pass Nico Rosberg for the lead. But the Red Bull driver pitted shortly afterwards, to get off his blistered qualifying rubber, and then had to climb his way back up through much of the top ten. First up was Petrov, followed swiftly by Kobayashi, putting Vettel in P5 by the end of lap 7. By lap 9 – and after a succession of pitstops from the men ahead – Vettel was up in P3, 3.6s behind race-leader Hamilton.

A second pass on Rosberg put Vettel in the perfect position to reclaim the lead when Hamilton pitted on lap 10, and the Red Bull driver was commanding the traffic behind when the British driver misjudged a pass on Kamui Kobayashi, hit the wall, and brought out the Safety Car.

Vettel spoke of the effect of the Safety Car on his race in Sunday's press conference.

"I would say yes and no," the defending world champion replied when asked whether he had been helped by the Safety Car. "Obviously, we could get the stop and not lose too much. But on the other hand I think I was six or seven seconds in the lead at the time, so we lost the lead and lost that gap that we had. I don't think it made a big difference at the end. Fortunately, with the new regulations we have there are very few possibilities that someone gains a big advantage, but all in all, I agree with Jenson: it is good to finish the race and not to crash this year. When I came close to him I was going to target to pass him at the long straight, not into the chicane so just to make sure, but it was a really fun race with plenty of overtaking due to the strategy we both had to go through. A lot of cars we had to overtake, but the car was fantastic, the pace was there and that's why we are sitting up here now.

"I think that in that regard it helped us as much as it helped other people – Fernando, who was in the lead to give his tyres a break, which allowed him to make his set last longer," Vettel continued. "I think it was the same, in a way. Obviously I was able to conserve the peak of the tyre and use it a bit longer afterwards but as I say, others gained some advantage and could cool down the tyres a bit as well."

Jenson Button and Michael Schumacher, both of whom started out of position, drove strong races to high finishes. The McLaren driver climbed 10 places to the bottom step of the podium, while the Mercedes man managed an impressive 19-place improvement, taking the chequered flag in P5.

While Vettel's win has terrible consequences for the shrinking chance of a nail-biting finish to the championship, it also shows how much stronger the Red Bull has become.

The RB7 is this year's supercar, a seemingly indestructible beast that suits every circuit. Logic dictated that Spa-Francorchamps rolling hills would suit a Mercedes engine, but the Red Bull coped just fine with its Renault, pulling away up the hills with apparent ease.

Much of the close of the calendar is comprised of Red Bull circuits. Since late 2009, when the Red Bull started winning regular races, the car has claimed wins at Suzuka, Brazil, and Abu Dhabi in both the 2009 and 2010 seasons.

Don't expect a shake-up this year.
