

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – Thursday press conference

While all eyes are on Formula 1 to make a stand – any stand – over the 2012 Bahrain Grand Prix, none of the drivers at the Thursday press conference in Shanghai were willing to make any moral statements about next weekend's race.

Present were Fernando Alonso (Ferrari), Paul di Resta (Force India), Narain Karthikeyan (HRT), Sergio Pérez (Sauber), Vitaly Petrov (Caterham), and Bruno Senna (Williams).

Bruno, great result in Malaysia. Do you think that was your best ever grand prix?

Bruno SENNA: I think it was a great race. We had strong pace and a pretty good strategy as well, even though we had an accident on the first lap, which could in theory have influenced our race result badly. Anyway, we had a strong race. I didn't make any mistakes during the race, apart from the first lap, and that's very encouraging. It shows the car has good performance in the dry and in the wet and we had both conditions in the race. I think it was a pretty good effort, not only from me but from the team as well. I'm not racing on my own.

Do you feel that those are the perfect conditions for you to perform best in the car this year?

BS: I don't think it's a case of this year but for sure in the early part of the season it's best when you have more mixed conditions. I'm still learning the team, learning the car, learning the tyres. I only came into the season quite late last year and quite a few things have changed as well. All this settling period takes a few races, so I hope I can get them out of the way as quickly as possible but for sure a few races like this would increase the chance of a good result for us but later in the season the drier the race the better.

The potential looks a lot better than it did last year for Williams. Are you confident of that and of the development necessary to keep them there?

BS: Yeah, the team has done a great leap forward in terms of performance. The changes that happened definitely made the team focus on the right areas and now it's up to us, to me and Pastor, and also the engineers to keep the development rate as high, or higher than the guys we're competing against to try and continue in the position we are. It's tough. If it was easy everyone would do it but it's the situation we're in. We're pushing very, very hard and for sure scoring points, especially big points as we did last race keeps everyone motivated.

Vitaly, you've been in the points here in the last couple of races, what are your feelings coming into this race? You've had a couple of races with Caterham, so what are your feelings about the team after a couple of races?

Vitaly PETROV: I think first of all, everyone has a good feeling to come back to a track when you have the first points in F1, so it's a good memory. I have a good memory to come back here because in 2010 I had a good race here, in the wet. I was quite quick and managed to finish in the points.

What's going inside the team?

VP: I feel quite happy. I feel more free to work. I felt much less pressure on my shoulders. Definitely I still have pressure because I have a very strong team-mate, so I need to work quite hard. But in general I'm a little bit more relaxed than last year.

I think we will be watching that battle with your team-mate with interest. It's been a focal point of watching your team so far this year?

VP: Last two races we did a good job during the race. I know I need to little bit improve my qualifying performance but we bring some good maps and some good set-up to this race, and we have some good updates coming, so I'll cross they fingers they work again, as good as we expect. Yeah, but as for the performance during the race we were not too bad. I think I need to work a little bit harder in qualifying and then we will see.

And are you comfortable now inside the car?

VP: Yeah, actually. It's quite comfortable and we still need to adjust the seat a little but at the moment it's OK.

Paul, were talking there about the battle between team-mates, which is always of interest. There's quite an interesting battle between yourself and Nico, you seem to be very closely matched.

Paul DI RESTA: Yeah, I think it was pretty similar last year with Adrian. Obviously with Nico, I have to have a lot of respect for him. At the moment we seem to be the closest drivers, against their team-mates, but it's always good to have that competitive nature in the team, you push each other along and drag the best out of each other. At the moment it's work in progress because were trying to develop the car. And to do that fast we have to work together to build our team to try to challenge the likes of Williams and Sauber, who are a bit in front of us at the moment. But, having scored the points that we have in the first two grands prix, we're certainly looking forward, hopefully until we get some updates on the car, and we can put some more performance on, which we're quite confident we can achieve.

This is your second Formula 1 season. Do you think the first one was learning and that this one is about confirming the form you showed last year?

PDR: I think there's more pressure for you to perform, in terms of being a second-year driver, but I've always had the task of just trying to pick the positive and certainly just trying to do the best I can in the sport I love doing. So far our race performance has showed to be stronger than our qualifying and the experience I got last year I think paid a lot to the result I got in Malaysia in tricky conditions and we managed to finish seventh. Everyone achieved the maximum we could from the package we had. We just need to make sure we're at the top of our game all this season, because to maintain the position, as a driver and as a constructor, that we achieved last year is a mighty challenger. But the vibe in the team is quite high and strong at the moment.

You talked earlier about how Sauber and Williams are perhaps a little bit ahead of you, whereas they weren't at the end of last season. There's a little bit of ground to be gained there. Are you confident of getting that back?

PDR: Yeah, I think we started this year very strong. They've obviously come up with updates and stuff. We've been relatively neutral. The tunnel and the factory are working very hard. We are looking forward to the next couple of races when we get back to Europe. We have a good package coming for Mugello. We've obviously been working very hard on that. We've taken the decision to leave it there to maximise that. Really, at the moment, we're trying to do the best job we can with the car we have. Certainly in Malaysia we achieved a lot so there's no reason why we can't do that again. Last year here our car showed more potential than we thought, so I hope that the philosophies that carried on from that, certainly lead into this year. We got into Q3 here with a car that nearly never got into Q2 in Melbourne.

Sergio, tell us about the reaction in Mexico to your second place in the last grand prix?

Sergio PEREZ: Well, it's been really great. I had some time there with the family, with friends, to enjoy the result we had. The people there were going crazy. It was a great result for my country. It was 40 years since the last podium we had in Formula 1, so it was really nice to feel all the support I'm getting from the fans, from the country.

Do you think there is more pressure on you now? And also, will there be more money for development with, perhaps, more money from Mexico?

SP: That would be a good sign, no? Already, the interest has come up, not only from Mexico, but from other companies around the world that can help us to develop our car, which is important for us. In terms of pressure, I think the pressure remains the same, giving my 100 per cent every race weekend, trying to have success, and just try to the best, that will be the target for the next 18 races.

I think a year ago we were thinking 'that Sergio Pérez is pretty good with the tyres' and a year later we're still thinking the same thing - after the first two grands prix. Have the specifications come to you? Have this year's specifications helped you?

SP: I don't think it has helped in terms of last year for me on the roadside. I can play the tyres, but sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't work. I always try to adapt myself to different conditions that you have in Formula 1 most of the time, which is even more difficult, to be adapting to every single condition. You have different conditions in free practice than in qualifying and it's very important to be able to adapt yourself to any condition.

But that's something that you're going to continue to exploit?

SP: Of course, there is a big potential there and with experience it will get better because when I came to Formula 1 it was (sound drops out) to keep changing your style. People always ask me 'what's your style?' but I think in Formula 1 you don't have one - you are always changing your style and trying to adapt yourself to any condition.

Fernando, what we expecting from you and what are you expecting from yourself and Ferrari this weekend? What's changed since the last race?

Fernando ALONSO: Nothing changed. I think it's going to be a tough weekend for us again. I don't expect any big surprises as we've been saying, the team and myself, all week, the car has some small improvements, nothing big for this race and I think it's the same, more or less, for all the other teams around us in the paddock. So I expect more or less the positions to maintain, or to keep the same as the first two races, which means a difficult to weekend for us. Struggling to be in Q3, I guess, in qualifying and then in the race to score as many points as possible as we did in the first races - trying to do a good strategy, a good management of the tyres and a little bit of luck. It's always a factor that we always seem to forget is there. I remember in Australia we had a great team effort from everybody there, a good strategy, pit stops etc, but we also had some luck to get the fifth result and in Malaysia we had the same. Starting from the first corner, we avoided any accident. It seems normal but every first corner is always a risk. We had Grosjean and Schumacher crashing in turn four in Malaysia, which we were very close to being in that accident as well. So, it's always... a race or a grand prix is not only pace, a good strategy or good driving skills. It's a big package and luck is a big factor. Hopefully the luck is still with us this weekend.

Will a wet track be part of that luck?

FA: I guess so.

So you're praying for rain?

FA: It can be a very good weekend for you or very bad because it's a little bit of gamble in the rain. Anything can happen. You can be with the right tyre in the right moment or completely the wrong tyre in the wrong moment, so this is what happens in wet races. As I said, with a normal race we know our possibilities, we know our limitations at the moment, which is not quick enough. So in a wet race, we can lose a couple of points or we can win a lot more. Maybe this risk of a wet race can be good for us at the moment because in normal conditions we are not as fast as we expected.

Fernando, you've passed Jackie Stewart's number of wins with your victory in Malaysia. Only Michael Schumacher, Alain Prost, Ayrton Senna and Nigel Mansell have won more races than you. That last win of yours was also compared with Gilles Villeneuve in that it was a win against the odds. What does it mean to you to be talked about in the company of those drivers?

FA: I'm privileged to be in that group of great drivers that I watched on TV as a kid and now I'm having a good career in Formula 1 and I've been extremely privileged to drive for fantastic teams in my career. So, the number of victories will hopefully increase even more and I will be up in this table. Records are not something that you pay a big importance to now, as you concentrated on your next grand prix or you are so focused on your daily preparation that you don't pay too much attention but I'm sure that in 10 or 15 years time I will appreciate it much more than now. But I'm not paying too much attention now.

Narain, it's been a difficult start to the season. Just give us some indication as to how difficult it has been for the team, for the drivers and the sort of mountain that there is to climb for the HRT team.

Narain KARTHIKEYAN: Yeah. The start of the year wasn't very good because we missed all the testing and then we came to Australia with a new car and like all new cars, it had a lot of problems with cooling and hydraulics and few laps. Clearly our car is still lacking a lot of downforce, which is the biggest problem. Pedro de la Rosa is quite good to help the team to go in the right direction, he has a lot of experience with big teams, so we're trying to improve. It's still a very small team and we have limited resources but I can see that the structure is a lot stronger than last year. There are some good people in the team and so we will improve quite a lot at the Mugello test hopefully.

It's obviously left you as a backmarker in the last race which got you involved in a public argument which we won't go into, but what is life like as a backmarker in Formula 1, especially when there are a lot of cars on the circuit due to the reliability of the cars? Are your eyes on the mirrors all time?

NK: Yes, practically after the first 15 laps or so after that it's very difficult because a lot of blue flags. I think at the last race there were something like 36 blue flags so it's quite difficult. The car is obviously five or six seconds off the pace and in tricky conditions like when we switched to dry tyres, with less downforce and it's so hard to drive and the car is a handful to drive in completely dry conditions, so in mixed conditions it's really difficult. But it is what it is, this is what I have and I will try to do the best with what I have.

Is the driver ever going to say that the car is too slow in those conditions, at one circuit or another?

NK: No, I think qualifying within the 107 percent is no longer a problem, but we need to improve for sure. We need to reduce the gap. If you take our lap times from last year, we have not improved so much. From the numbers we had, we were hoping that the car would take a significant step forward but that is not the case right now. We know the reasons, there is a wind tunnel programme and we're trying to improve it.

Fernando, are you surprised that the Red Bulls haven't been as competitive as they were last year and that they will come back very soon?

FA: Not surprised because I know the complex world of Formula 1 and developing a car in Formula 1 is not the easiest thing in the world but for us and for the team, we were surprised that when we put the car on the track in winter testing that we didn't have the results we were hoping for and that was the biggest surprise. From that point, you start working on the car, you start working on the improvements and you know that there's not a magic button that you touch, or a magic part of the track that you can change and the car immediately becomes competitive. You start work that has to be done properly, step-by-step and hopefully new parts will come very soon that will make the car quicker but this is something that we need to be calm about, let the people in Italy work and here when we are on trackside and at the Grand Prix try to maximise the potential we have in our hands: it's what we did in the first two races and what we will try to do in the next two.

Does any member of the panel acknowledge that they might have a moral difficulty in going to Bahrain next week?

There is no reply.

Fernando, in this race are you waiting for big improvements or is everything going according to plan? Or are you waiting until Barcelona for a big improvement?

FA: As I said, no big improvements for this race and I don't think... No big improvements for this race and as I said, we're working, we're working on the car and I think we cannot say that for Barcelona there will be a big improvement because we don't know. We are working day and night to do the work and to improve the car and I think we have some new parts for the car which we need to test tomorrow - maybe they are working fine, maybe they are not working and we need to come back with those parts. In Barcelona there will be more new parts which I'm hoping for. We need to test to see if they are working fine. For Canada there will do more, Monaco, so it's nothing... as I said, Formula 1 these days doesn't have a magic button where we change something, we arrive in China, we arrive in Barcelona, in Canada and you change one part on the car and you improve by one second. This will be constant work from the team, improving one tenth, two tenths, three tenths every step that we do and we need to do it quicker than the others because all the other teams will bring a couple tenths (advantage) to every race so we need to bring some more.

Sergio, how is your approach to this Grand Prix, considering that everybody is maybe expecting something similar from you in comparison to the last two races? It looks very hard not to be affected by the interest everybody has in you.

SP: I think we are really realistic as a team. We know that the Malaysian race was not a normal race, the conditions were extremely difficult for everybody. We got them right, we stopped at the right time more or less and we were able to fight for victory, but I think in normal conditions this is not where we belong, we have to be very realistic and our target is still to score as many points as possible. If we can score another podium during the year it will be great, but we are very realistic that it can really only happen in different conditions.

Narain, tomorrow in the drivers' briefing what's your position with Vettel?

NK: For me it was a racing incident and we've spoken to each other so it should be OK.

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – FPI report

While Lewis Hamilton was top of the timesheets following a damp and drizzly practice session on a grey Shanghai morning, the session belonged to the paddock's reserve drivers.

Three of the paddock's reserve men – Valtteri Bottas, Giedo van der Garde, and Jules Bianchi – took to the Shanghai International Circuit this morning for their turn behind the F1 steering wheel.

Bottas acquitted himself well in his second free practice session of the season, beating full-time teammate Pastor Maldonado by a margin of three-tenths. This is the second time Bottas outpaced the Venezuelan in free practice, and every tenth sees the Finn that much closer to the seat that all presume will be his next season.

Thanks to the variable weather and track conditions in Shanghai this morning, there was very limited running on offer. No driver completed more than 16 laps of the circuit in the 90 minutes available, making FPI even more of a non-event for spectators than it normally is.

One point of interest came from Red Bull, where Sebastian Vettel was running the RB8's original exhaust configuration, while Mark Webber stuck with the version the team debuted at the end of winter testing. Vettel was struggling to make the new layout work for him, and so elected to take a step back in configuration terms, while Webber was happy with the car referred to as the B-spec.

While Vettel was still slightly slower than his teammate, the two men were split by a margin of only two-tenths when the chequered flag fell on the morning's track action.

One split that was of interest was between pace-setting Lewis Hamilton and McLaren teammate Jenson Button: despite driving identical cars, the two

men were two seconds apart when it counted. Both men were trying out a revised package of upgrades including a new floor and modified front and rear wings.

It was a strong morning for Mercedes, whose drivers finished in P2 and P3. Michael Schumacher topped the timesheets for much of the session, and it looked as though the German driver would stay there before late fliers from Hamilton and Nico Rosberg dethroned the man in the red helmet.

Over at Ferrari, Fernando Alonso and Felipe Massa were split by only a tenth, although it was a poor showing from both drivers, who finished the morning around three seconds down on Hamilton's time.

Conversely, Ferrari engine-mates Sauber put on a strong showing. Sergio Perez lapped in 1.38.584s, good enough for P4 in the standings, while Kamui Kobayashi ended the morning in P5, slightly more than three-tenths down on his teammate.

FP1 times (unofficial)

1. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.37.106s [7 laps]
2. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.38.116s [14 laps]
3. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.38.316s [14 laps]
4. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.38.584s [13 laps]
5. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.38.911s [12 laps]
6. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.38.977s [15 laps]
7. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.39.198s [12 laps]
8. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.39.199s [6 laps]
9. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.39.748s [16 laps]
10. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.39.768s [14 laps]
11. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.40.056s [14 laps]
12. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.40.153s [14 laps]
13. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1.40.298s [8 laps]
14. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.40.328s [13 laps]
15. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.40.540s [12 laps]
16. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.41.071s [14 laps]
17. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.41.204s [14 laps]
18. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.42.330s [14 laps]
19. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) 1.42.521s [11 laps]
20. Jules Bianchi (Force India) 1.44.118s [8 laps]
21. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.44.227s [10 laps]
22. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.44.500s [15 laps]
23. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.47.204s [12 laps]
24. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.50.465s [11 laps]

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – FP2 report

It was a dreary afternoon in Shanghai when the cars left the pitlane for the second practice session of the Chinese Grand Prix weekend.

But while the skies were grey and the air heavy, the morning's rain was little more than a memory. As a result, FP2 saw a dramatic increase in action on track, and the session was not without incident.

By far the most dramatic event of the afternoon came about courtesy of Marussia's Timo Glock. The German driver came off at Turn 1 with no front wing, and hit the barriers hard, hurting his hand in the process. Marussia has yet to determine whether Glock crashed because the wing came off, or if the wing came off before he crashed: an investigation is expected to last into the night.

Other incidents of note came about thanks to Caterham's Vitaly Petrov and Force India's Paul di Resta, both of whom span after running wide at the end of their laps.

Kamui Kobayashi, meanwhile, slid across the run-off area in a manner last seen in Tokyo Drift and entirely unbecoming of an F1 car. But the Japanese driver was able to hold it together, and managed to avoid beaching his Sauber in the kitty litter.

While McLaren's Lewis Hamilton started the session as he had ended the previous one – on the top of the timesheets – the British driver ended the afternoon nearly two-tenths down on pacesetter Michael Schumacher, who topped the charts for Mercedes.

Schumacher may have beaten Hamilton this afternoon, but a closer look at their respective runs showed that the McLaren driver should still be the man to beat on Saturday.

And he needs to be – thanks to a gearbox change, Hamilton is carrying a five-place grid penalty into Sunday's race, and needs to secure the best qualifying result he can if he is to be in with a chance of a longed-for victory this weekend.

Red Bull appeared to take a step up in performance terms this afternoon, with Sebastian Vettel and Mark Webber taking up P3 and P4 in the timesheets. The two teammates are driving different versions of the RB8, with Webber using the 'B-spec' car debuted at the end of winter testing, while Vettel has elected to stick with the original design.

The main difference between the two cars is the exhaust layout; each man has his own preference but Vettel is finding more rear downforce from

the earlier configuration, giving the world champion more confidence in cornering.

By and large, little should be read into the times set this afternoon, as the morning's reduced running time meant teams had to squeeze two sessions' worth of development work into a single ninety-minute slot.

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.35.973s [32 laps]
2. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.36.145s [29 laps]
3. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.36.160s [27 laps]
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.36.433s [24 laps]
5. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.36.617s [31 laps]
6. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.36.711s [28 laps]
7. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.36.956s [28 laps]
8. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.36.966s [31 laps]
9. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.37.191s [31 laps]
10. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.37.316s [32 laps]
11. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.37.417s [22 laps]
12. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.37.616s [33 laps]
13. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.37.836s [30 laps]
14. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.37.930s [32 laps]
15. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.37.972s [26 laps]
16. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.38.176s [35 laps]
17. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.38.293s [31 laps]
18. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.38.783s [37 laps]
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.38.990s [36 laps]
20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.39.346s [20 laps]
21. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.39.651s [15 laps]
22. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.40.343s [25 laps]
23. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.40.753s [30 laps]
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.41.125s [26 laps]

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – Friday press conference

It was an unlikely assortment of individuals who lined up at Friday's team personnel press conference, from the high profile to the no profile, via the newly-appointed.

Present were James Allison (Lotus), Antonio Cuquerella (HRT), Pat Fry (Ferrari), Dave Greenwood (Marussia), Paddy Lowe (McLaren), and Matt Morris (Sauber).

A question to you all. If you'd like to give a swift appraisal of where you feel you are in the pecking order after two grands prix, and what you think the potential is, where you think you can be?

Matt MORRIS: I think it's very difficult to tell. I think there are five or six teams that are all very close, and I think we're one of those teams, but exactly where we stand, we probably need another couple of races.

What about potential?

MM: Yeah, I think we've clearly shown that we've got a competitive car, but we also need to keep our feet on the ground, remember who we are and who we're competing against. But, for sure, we feel we can be scoring points on a regular basis.

Toni, a very difficult start to the season for you.

Antonio CUQUERELLA: Yes, it was indeed. For us we came later, we started later than the others and it's a race to catch up for us. We are just trying to bring the car to the performance it was supposed to have in the first race, so that's where we are. It's quite clear, everyone can see that, we are at the back, we are the last ones. So we are just trying to get closer to the rest.

And the others?

Dave GREENWOOD: A similar situation to Toni for us, a late start to the year, which is not what we wanted. Again, we're towards the back end, which is fairly obvious, and we're just working hard to catch up to the guys in front. I think there's a fairly big gap between us and the front, there's no disputing that, but our main job is to close that gap and we've already seen from last race to this we've closed that slightly and we've just got to keep going like that.

James ALLISON: I think the first couple of races would suggest we're Q3 material. I would hope that we're towards the front of Q3 but, as everyone will say, it's very tight this year, the gaps in the grid are very small and the tiniest error makes a lot of grid places at the moment.

Paddy LOWE: We're obviously over the moon to have had the qualifying results we've had in the first two races, front row in both races. That's what you dream of really, with all the work you do on a new car that starts early the year before. It's a great result for the whole team. A bit less satisfied with what we've delivered from the races but in terms of overall performance – very pleased.

Pat FRY: I think our performance here is likely to mirror the first two races. We've got a few small upgrades here that should improve it a fair amount but then I think this track suits us less favourably than the last one really, so I expect the gaps are going to be similar. We have a lot of work to do to catch the others, particularly in qualifying.

Matt, a more specific question to you. Now you're very close in that midfield and one of the teams that perhaps can improve by using a Mercedes-type device, they call it a DDRS. Have you got the time; have you got the money and the budget to do that?

MM: We're looking into the system to try and assess it fully, to work out the lap time, or qualifying lap time gain, versus costs. I think at the moment for us it doesn't balance out. We're probably better off spending our money on more conventional lap time.

A question related to last year, when perhaps you're exhaust-blown diffuser didn't work. Was there any advantage in that this year?

MM: It's not really been an advantage; I think we've just lost less than some of the other teams maybe, because, by our own admission, we didn't have the best exhaust blown diffuser last year, so for sure we had more to lose.

Has that had something to do with the performance do you think?

MM: I think it's brought us closer to some of the other teams, yes.

Toni, it's an uphill struggle for you. Just give us some indication of the sort of facilities you have at the moment, the staff you have etc?

AC: It's clear that we are changing. From last year to this year there has been a big changing hands in the management of the team and we are even relocating to a different country in Europe. Our car has been designed by different clusters around Europe, with not everybody in the same room. Now we are trying to centralise everything and work as a team, which has not been the case in the last two years. The main goal then... we still need to get organised and that will bring performance and the development we want on the car.

That sounds like the sort of think that will take an awful long time to do, like a whole year almost, a whole season.

AC: Of course we are making some appointments and we are trying to hire more people to reinforce ourselves but it is not going to be something we expect to be working in two or three months. It going be, as you say, probably more thinking of next year but some results need to show this year, in the second half of the season.

Dave Greenwood, to some extent you've been doing the same thing because the whole factory has relocated as well. Where are you in that process?

DG: I think we're basically in the process where we now have a solid design team and an aerodynamic group that's expanded rapidly over the last six months. We're in a process now where we're using a wind tunnel on a regular basis, matching that in with the CFD, so if you like we're further along that process. We're still very much at the start of it but I think it's bringing improvements to the car much better than we've seen before in the previous two years of how we worked. So all in all a positive.

And the development is on course? Is there a programme for that?

DG: Like every team you have a development programme and ours has been perhaps a little bit delayed in how it started from winter testing but we've hit the ground running now we're racing and we've brought developments to the last two races and today we ran new developments as well and we're happy with how they're progressing.

James, yesterday you took a protest to the stewards. How disappointed were you with the outcome of that?

JA: It's been no secret that our team has had some disagreements with what we saw Mercedes to be running. We thought there were strong arguments against such a thing. That's been rumbling along gently in the background, as everyone knows. We made what we hoped were strong arguments both to Mercedes and to the FIA but didn't prevail and so with some regret we decided it was worth bringing it before the stewards to settle the matter one way or the other. I have to say we got a very fair hearing yesterday. The stewards took a lot of time to listen to our arguments and what I hoped were very strong arguments didn't prevail - but that's the process and it's fair enough, just get on with it and accept that we were wrong in our earlier view.

What is the reaction to that? What do you do now? Are you doing to do the same thing?

JA: Just die like a man! Get on with looking at what possibilities are open, having accepted that this is a perfectly OK system to put on the car.

Is it something that you think every technical director will now be looking at?

JA: Well they'll certainly need to decide whether or not the cost and expense... well it's not so much expense, the opportunity-cost of doing that system is higher than developing the things they had in mind otherwise. And that's exactly the same choice we'll face in our team.

Paddy, a question about Lewis' gearbox. How come it was only discovered yesterday?

PL: Well it's a bit of a disappointment. We were able to notice a problem as a result of analysing some oil samples that showed a problem that's developing in the rear of the gearbox. It could still work but the risk of a failure during the race itself is too great and a much greater penalty from that than would come from a five grid-place penalty. So very disappointing for everyone, particularly Lewis, to start a race weekend in that way on the back foot. But, y'know, we'll do the best with what we have. Try to get pole position so that at worst he'll be in sixth.

On a completely different subject, we have a Mugello test coming up, we haven't had an in-season test for several years now, to what extent has simulation etc overtaken that? Or is it still invaluable?

PL: It's still very, very valuable. Simulation has grown a great deal in the last few years and we do depend a lot more on it. In fact it pushes the testing in a slightly different direction, in the same way you saw this morning we were running on Lewis' car a big sampling array for aerodynamic pressures. We're using these tools in order to validate our simulations. So we increasingly use testing in order to calibrate the simulations we're doing in the office. So, it's very, very important still. I think what's happened is that we've moved the testing bias towards Fridays rather than the tests that used to occur between each race. We get the job done, we just do it probably more efficiently really by using the race practice. Mugello will allow a few other things. It's a redistribution of where we put the effort. We used to have that test in the pre-season period. That's been moved to April. It allows us to do a few different things mid-season that we wouldn't have been able to do. It's a lot more work actually, that we haven't been used to but it helps us make a step mid-season.

Pat, obviously the problems with the car. How fundamental are those problems?

PF: I think we have a reasonable understanding of them and the areas we need to be working on. It's like all these things, there's never a golden bullet, it's not a light switch you can turn on. You might have the idea of, 'OK, that's the problem' but it's hard work to try and fix it. And you're not going to change it around in a week. Everyone is working very hard to fix all those issues and then get back on a sensible development curve.

And really you discovered those problems some time ago. Is it a surprise not to have seen more bits on the car since the last race?
PF: I think there's a number of different issues that we've had, the most obvious one from the early testing was the exhaust system where we were struggling with what that was doing to the rear tyres. I think we now understand that and are on top of that – though we haven't run that style exhaust system since the first Barcelona test. The other areas have come to light where we knew we had the problems [but] we didn't know where and we were really learning that through the last Barcelona test. And then to fix problems it's not the work of a minute. Here there are quite a few new parts on the car. There will be another set of updates, bigger updates, coming through for Barcelona. It's a race of upgrading. We've got a lot of upgrades coming through but so does everyone else around this table.

Following up on the question on the pecking order, from first through twelfth, where do you see yourselves now and when you get the car more sorted, where do you have the potential to be? For the front row.

PF: I think here the grid will look quite similar to that at the last two races. I don't think the pecking order is going to swing around that much. We're going to be somewhere around seventh to eleventh or something. Obviously we need to get a better car so that ultimately we're qualifying on pole. It would be nice to be able to sit and say we're qualifying on pole, take a five place penalty and start sixth. That would be quite a luxury really.

PL: As I said earlier, we're very pleased to have taken the front row in the first two races. Also, as Pat said, the upgrade war which is a relentless one through the season has already begun so we can't rely on maintaining that performance even to this race; we've all brought upgrades this weekend, so we hope to be able to maintain that through tomorrow and take the front row again, but we certainly can't rely on it and certainly can't rely on staying there throughout the rest of the season. It will be long and very tough.

JA: I think our best car was third in Australia, sixth in Sepang so I guess that puts us P four and a half. I've got no idea where we will come in this race. I think, like the other two, that the pecking order is likely to be largely unchanged. We're all pushing similarly hard developing our cars and I see no reason why there should be any substantial change to the running order. What will make the difference is very small errors during qualifying because the grid positions are separated by less than a tenth of a second.

This is for everybody except for James: did you agree with Lotus in their assertion that the Mercedes system was against article 3.15?

MM: I don't think it's really for us to comment on the argument that James has had. We've got our views on it but it's not really for us to discuss that.

AC: I think we have the same point of view. We understand both parties and we accept what the FIA has said.

DG: Exactly the same. I think it's a matter for the FIA and the other two parties involved.

PL: For us it was a point of quite tricky interpretation so what we mainly wanted was clarity, so we have a clear decision from the stewards and I think that's better than the uncertainty that we've had in the last few weeks.

PF: I think there's always different ways to interpret the rules, we've seen that going on for years. At least now there's a clear decision: we obviously respect that decision. People are always trying to stretch the limit of the rules. We had a wing that was legal in Barcelona on a Friday, Friday night it wasn't. Again, we respected that decision and took it off the car.

Pat Fry has talked about 'no golden bullet to fix the Ferrari'; McLaren is very quick so this is for the other four guys: what one area of the car do you really need to work on to make it even better?

MM: I don't think there's one particular area to be honest with you. I think we continue looking at every part in the car, both aero-wise, mechanical set-up-wise and also the way we go about our race weekend in qualifying and in the race, so I don't think there's one single item that we specifically concentrate on, it's just an overall group effort on the whole car.

AC: In our case I think it's very clear. From the teams that we are close to in qualifying, especially in our case, the difference is aero. Ninety percent of our lap time gap to the front row is aero. Of course there is a difference in aero programmes and budgets, so we just need to get more with less money, so it is possible.

DG: The same for us really: aero is the key at the minute and that's what we're working hard on, but in lots of areas though, not just finding parts that we think have got more downforce but correlation and understanding flow structures and all that kind of stuff. We're on a steep learning curve and that's where we're heading, basically.

JA: I'm with Matt, you fight the thing on all fronts and try to pick, across the whole gamut of bits you could put on the car to improve it, the ones that will bring the most improvement the fastest, but there isn't a family of parts that you pick from. It just depends on what ideas you've come up with in the factory, what the team has come up with in the factory.

For Pat Fry and Paddy Lowe in particular: are you going to develop a solution similar to Mercedes for your car in the next few races – I mean the F-duct?

PF: We've been looking at it for a while. I think it's just a case of weighing up what the performance is on our car. It's bound to vary differently from car to car and particularly if you've had that system in mind and developed your car to work around it, you're further up the development curve so it's not just a case of applying it to our current aerodynamic characteristic, it's then trying to exploit it further after that, so I expect there will be a two-fold thing: we will know instantly – or we know instantly – what it's worth in terms of lap time and we can weigh that up in the cost performance and the effort needed. And then we also need to look at what's the ultimate potential of that device. We've been looking at it for a month or two. Now it's clear we can at least start working for sure, weighing up everything properly.

PL: In these days of really very limited capacity – whether that's people or time in wind tunnels – to develop aerodynamics, you do have to carefully select where you put your effort to make the most profit in performance, so this will fall into that camp. We have to decide how much we can get from it, how it ranks compared to other areas we may work on. It does have the immediate downside that it really is only a qualifying benefit as far as we can see, so immediately it has to earn quite a lot to make that worthwhile.

Antonio, we know that the Chinese driver Ma Qing Hua joined HRT recently. How do you describe his future at HRT and what do you think he should do to ensure that he becomes a real Formula 1 driver? And secondly, after nine years of Formula 1 coming to China, Chinese people are still concerned that there is not a native Formula 1 driver or team so do you think it's just a question of a lack of money or lack of some kind of culture or is it just about timing?

AC: We still don't know – the driver hasn't jumped into the car yet, so we still need to know his capabilities and as soon as we have an opportunity, he will drive in the young drivers' test so we have hopes of him and of course he's a part of our young development programme. We don't know how much we can expect from him but of course there are big hopes. Regarding China, I think there are many countries, including India and China, that are far from Europe where the centre of gravity of Formula 1 has been in the past. They are just becoming important and we can see that China is an important country for the future. There are many countries that were not important in F1 and now they are becoming important in the last two years, so why not China in two years?

Pat, could you explain why you think the car is so far off the pace at the moment, notwithstanding the exhaust problem which presumably can't account for all of it? And why the team decided to take such a different design approach when, if you look at Silverstone last year when the blown diffusers were taken off, you were actually quite competitive?

PF: I don't think you can use Silverstone as a benchmark for the car performance this year. Obviously the exhaust effect is reduced a huge amount from what we had last year. As I said, the exhaust is one of the more obvious changes that we've made, but that's quite a small part of the problem that we've got. I don't really want to go into where all the problems are – it's not just a case of us trying to build a quicker car, we need to fundamentally be changing the methodologies that we use to select, design and manufacture so that we are competitive long term. There's work on all fronts, not just work going into what we're taking to Barcelona, there's also a huge amount of work in just trying to change the fundamentals of what we do so we can actually take a step forward and be competing with everyone else.

As a follow-up, can you just mention briefly what areas you think specifically the team is lacking in as opposed to the specific design features of the car?

PF: The biggest performance differentiator – as people have mentioned earlier – is aerodynamics. We've got some issues there that we're trying to resolve. The areas you need to be working on is everything from the way you run the wind tunnel, the accuracy of your wind tunnel, the simulation that you use to decide what components to take forward, so we're not leaving any stone unturned. We're actually trying to review and revise our methodologies through the whole process and that carries on into the design office for trying to get weight out of various parts, make other bits more durable, so there's work going on absolutely everywhere within the company, on the basic fundamental methodology as well as just trying to upgrade the car.

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – FP3 report

When the pitlane opened for the final practice session of the Chinese Grand Prix weekend, Friday's grey skies had gone, replaced by a thick grey smog that made it hard to see from one end of the paddock to the other.

As the drivers lapped a circuit surrounded by largely empty grandstands, the cool track temperatures made it a struggle to get heat into – and keep it in – the Pirelli rubber.

But Saturday's low track temperatures were dramatically higher than those on offer on Friday, and as a result the teams had their work cut out in the early part of the session as they re-evaluated the set-up work done in cooler conditions the day before.

Neither Lewis Hamilton nor Jenson Button appeared to have much trouble with their tyres: the McLaren pair were three-tenths clear of their nearest rivals at the top of the timesheets when the session drew to a close.

Hamilton has been on strong form so far this weekend, and the British driver will need his run to continue if he is to be in with a chance of overcoming the five-place grid penalty he was issued at the start of the weekend for an unscheduled gearbox change.

Mercedes continued their run of pace, with Nico Rosberg and Michael Schumacher finishing FP3 in P3 and P4 on the timesheets. The relatively cooler climes of Shanghai are currently working in the Silver Arrows' favour, reducing the rapid tyre degradation the car suffered at the first two races of the season. Whether the improved rate of tyre wear will carry over into tomorrow's race remains to be seen, as a lot depends on the climactic conditions.

Red Bull continue to be behind their rivals in the timesheets, but there is a real sense in the paddock that neither Sebastian Vettel nor Mark Webber has truly shown his hand this weekend – there could be surprises to come in this afternoon's qualifying session.

Webber was comfortably faster than his teammate this morning, but now that Vettel is running an exhaust configuration he is more confident with, it would not be surprising to see the Red Bull driver pull one of his last-second pole laps out of the bag.

Over at Ferrari, the prognosis isn't looking good. Fernando Alonso and Felipe Massa continue to struggle with the F2012 despite a raft of upgrades; the team have said that the characteristics of the Shanghai track do not suit their car, and no one from the Scuderia is expecting a repeat of their surprise Sepang victory.

One man to watch with interest this afternoon will be Sauber's Sergio Perez. The Mexican driver performed well in the morning session, and he is looking to improve on his Malaysian P2 finish should conditions allow. Given the Sauber's deft touch when it comes to rubber, the right strategy tomorrow could pay dividends for the Swiss team.

FP3 times (unofficial)

1. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.35.940s [13 laps]
2. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.36.063s [12 laps]
3. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.36.389s [16 laps]
4. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.36.512s [17 laps]
5. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.36.635s [16 laps]
6. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.36.765s [17 laps]
7. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.36.781s [19 laps]
8. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.36.880s [17 laps]
9. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.37.039s [15 laps]
10. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.37.061s [17 laps]
11. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.37.237s [16 laps]
12. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.37.274s [19 laps]
13. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.37.288s [16 laps]

14. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.37.425s [14 laps]
 15. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.37.465s [12 laps]
 16. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.37.493s [13 laps]
 17. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.37.628s [14 laps]
 18. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.37.831s [14 laps]
 19. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.38.701s [19 laps]
 20. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.39.198s [19 laps]
 21. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.39.769s [18 laps]
 22. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.40.048s [17 laps]
 23. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.41.263s [14 laps]
 24. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.40.499s [18 laps]
-

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – Q1 report

As the pit lane opened for the first phase of qualifying for the Chinese Grand Prix, the track temperature had edged up to 26 degrees, while the air temperature hovered around 21 degrees.

The track is the warmest it's been all weekend, which should help the teams when it comes to getting heat into their tyres.

The first timed lap of the session came via Force India's Paul di Resta, who crossed the line in 1.38.190s. But the Scot was instantly dethroned by Felipe Massa, who managed a 1.37.964s for Ferrari. These times are roughly two seconds slower than those set in FP3.

Both Jenson Button and Lewis Hamilton went fastest on their first timed laps, continuing the MP4-27's strong run of form this weekend. Hamilton was half a second faster than his teammate, and the first man to set a time (in qualifying) in the 1.36s, although he was quickly joined by Kamui Kobayashi and Sebastian Vettel.

Mark Webber was the first man to best Hamilton's time, crossing the line in 1.36.682s.

With the session half run, there were times on the board from all 24 drivers, none of whom were at risk of falling foul of the 107 percent rule. In the dropout zone at the mid-point were Jean-Eric Vergne, Vitaly Petrov, Heikki Kovalainen, Timo Glock, Charles Pic, Pedro de la Rosa, and Narain Karthikeyan.

When the session was two-thirds run, the stewards announced that they would be investigating claims of impeding against Heikki Kovalainen and Pastor Maldonado, with both men under investigation for impeding other drivers.

But the real surprise came with five minutes remaining, when Felipe Massa went fastest in the first and second sectors, before crossing the line in P1 with a 1.36.556s lap.

The Brazilian driver was the first man to run on the softer compound, and the timing of his improved lap gave his rivals the chance to swap rubber and repeat the feat for themselves. But there was no need for the front runners to waste rubber in Q1; despite Massa's pace the move smacked of desperation from Ferrari, who have expressed their concern that neither car will reach Q3 this afternoon.

Massa's time at the top was short lived, and lasted for as long as it took for the other drivers on soft tyres to complete their laps. As the session drew to a close it was Sergio Perez who topped the timesheets with a 1.36.198s.

The dropout zone remained unchanged from the middle of the session, with Jean-Eric Vergne joining the six drivers from F1's newer teams.

Dropout zone

18. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso)
 19. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham)
 20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
 21. Timo Glock (Marussia)
 22. Charles Pic (Marussia)
 23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT)
 24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)
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F1 Chinese Grand Prix – Q2 report

As the pitlane opened for Q2 in Shanghai, the temperature out on track had fallen by a single degree.

The session had been running for what felt like milliseconds when the stewards announced a second investigation for impeding, this time between Bruno Senna and Pedro de la Rosa. The incident in question took place during Q1, not Q2, as the HRT driver was eliminated in the first round of qualifying.

Despite the reduced number of men on track, Q2 was far busier than the first session. All of the drivers who made it through into the second session lapped in the 1m36s during Q1, and in such a tight qualifying there is no choice but to set a banker nice and early, leaving time for a final flyer if it's needed as the clock counts down.

Michael Schumacher, Nico Rosberg, Lewis Hamilton, Kimi Raikkonen, and Kamui Kobayashi all crossed the line in the 1m35s range, while Vettel was 0.047s into the 1m36s on his first timed lap in Q2.

With the session half run, the dropout zone was comprised of Pastor Maldonado, Nico Hulkenberg, Daniel Ricciardo, Bruno Senna, Paul di Resta, Felipe Massa, and Romain Grosjean, with the Lotus driver still in the pits with no time set.

Grosjean finally left the pits with enough time to complete a single timed lap in Q2; the Frenchman has one shot and one shot only at making it into the top ten on tomorrow's grid.

In the dying moments of the session, with lap times around the dropout zone changing by the second, Felipe Massa was knocked into the dropout zone, while Mark Webber was hovering on the edge in P10. But the Australian went purple in the second sector, and set a personal best time in the first sector, eventually crossing the line in the safety of P1.

Grosjean crossed the line in P7 on his only lap, and as the Lotus driver established he was safely in Q3, Sebastian Vettel was knocked out – an unprecedented situation last season, and the first time in many moons that the German has been eliminated from a qualifying session.

Joining Vettel in the dropout zone were Massa, Maldonado, Senna, di Resta, Hulkenberg, and Ricciardo. With the exception of Massa and Vettel, the back of the grid is comprised by pairs of teammates lining up side by side.

Dropout zone

11. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)
12. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)
14. Bruno Senna (Williams)
15. Paul di Resta (Force India)
16. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India)
17. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso)

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – Q3 report

The big surprise of Q2 was the unscheduled departure of Sebastian Vettel, knocked out in qualifying for the first time in living memory.

Track temperatures fell by a further two degrees between Q2 and Q3, down to 23 degrees. Air temperature remained constant.

Kimi Raikkonen was the first man to set a timed lap in the final round of qualifying for the Chinese Grand Prix; the Finn crossed the line in 1.35.898s. But the Lotus driver was quickly dethroned by the Mercedes pair. Nico Rosberg took provisional pole on his first timed lap with a 1.35.121s, while Michael Schumacher was half a second behind.

Lewis Hamilton – who needs a pole if possible this afternoon, thanks to a five-place grid penalty – crossed the line in 1.35.626s with his first effort, while teammate Jenson Button remained in the garage, presumably saving his rubber for a single run at the end of the session.

As Q3 reached the half-way mark, only four times stood on the board. Sergio Perez and Mark Webber were out on track, while Jenson Button, Fernando Alonso, Romain Grosjean, and Kamui Kobayashi all stayed in the pits, putting all their eggs in a single-lap basket.

With three minutes remaining, the track began to fill up. By the time the clock had counted down to two minutes, all but Rosberg were out on their final (or first) fliers.

The benchmark for pole remains Rosberg's 1.35.121s.

Sergio Perez crossed the line in 1.36.524s, good enough for provisional P6 but with time to spare to complete a second lap.

Button, Alonso, Grosjean, and Kobayashi had yet to set timed laps as the chequered flag fell, but the Japanese driver crossed the line seconds later in 1.35.784s. Grosjean aborted his lap, and did not set a time in this session.

And with Q3 complete, Nico Rosberg has scored his first career pole. Thanks to Lewis Hamilton's penalty, it will be a Mercedes front row at tomorrow's Chinese Grand Prix.

Provisional grid

1. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes)
2. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
3. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
4. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus)
5. Jenson Button (McLaren)
6. Mark Webber (Red Bull)
7. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren)*
8. Sergio Perez (Sauber)
9. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)

10. Romain Grosjean (Lotus)
11. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)
12. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)
14. Bruno Senna (Williams)
15. Paul di Resta (Force India)
16. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India)
17. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso)
18. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso)
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham)
20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
21. Timo Glock (Marussia)
22. Charles Pic (Marussia)
23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT)
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)

* Lewis Hamilton was issued with a five-place grid penalty for a gearbox change.

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – Saturday press conference

After a very unusual qualifying session, Nico Rosberg was the man of the moment at the Shanghai Saturday press conference with his first career pole. Adding to Mercedes' pleasure was the inherited front-row lock-out, thanks to Lewis Hamilton's grid penalty.

Present were Nico Rosberg (Mercedes), Lewis Hamilton (McLaren), and Michael Schumacher (Mercedes).

Nico, sensational lap how do you feel about your first F1 pole?

Nico ROSBERG: Fantastic, yeah, thank you. It went really well, it's a very special feeling definitely. Now obviously looking forward to starting first tomorrow.

Where did you find the time?

NR: The track was cooling off a little bit, the temperatures were coming down slightly and so the rear tyres started to work a little bit better. Changed the setup of the car slightly before the last run and just got a perfect lap so it worked out really, really well.

Lewis, moving to you, you virtually grew up with Nico through the karting and the single-seaters. Tell us how you feel first of all about his achievement today?

Lewis HAMILTON: Big congratulations to Nico, it's fantastic and really done in style: it's quite a big gap between us. I'm very proud of him and obviously we grew up racing together and always dreamed of being in Formula 1 together and now we're on the front row together. Obviously I've got a penalty but still, it's a good day.

And what about your own performance today and how you feel you're fixed for the race, bearing in mind where you're going to start on the grid tomorrow?

LH: We're in a good position I think. I made some good setup changes to the car, it feels good, particularly for the long runs. It's going to be tough for sure, there are a lot of good drivers ahead of me but I'll be pushing as hard as I can.

Michael, we heard you on the radio asking for Nico's lap time and when the engineer told you, you sounded pretty surprised by what he'd achieved. Sum up what you think about what you two have done today.

Michael SCHUMACHER: No, I said actually 'well done', because that was a phenomenal lap time. For all of us, to see the gap that big is a bit of a surprise but there you go. He's known as a good qualifier and no reason [for me] to be unhappy. The opposite: happy for him for his first pole. Congratulations as we know – I guess – it's going to be the first [front] row of a proper Mercedes Silver Arrow that we're going to take place in the Shanghai Grand Prix tomorrow. That's a great achievement.

That's right, with Lewis moving five places back

MS: Good for us!

How about your race situation? Obviously you've qualified well in these cars so far this season but we've seen you go backwards in the race. Do you think it'll be easy on the tyres tomorrow in this car?

MS: Well, my two races, one I retired and the other one I got put backwards by being spun around, so it's not completely clear what we would have seen with our car. It's certainly a question mark whether we would have been able to keep up that position but we'll try our best to do so.

Back you Nico, that's qualifying over with but what do you feel you can do in the race because Mercedes certainly need the points tomorrow, don't they?

NR: Yeah, for me it's also sort of the start of the season now because the first two races haven't gone too well. So it's not bad to start first, obviously for us it's fantastic. Of course it's pretty clear I think that in the race we been not quite as good as in qualifying lately. We've worked very hard to try and improve that but it's not something you can change in a few weeks. It's going to take some time but we're making good progress in the race, that's important. It's difficult to know exactly where we're going to be tomorrow because again with the conditions changing, if it becomes a little bit colder that might help us, for example. I don't really know how it's going to go. For sure we're going to try our best. We're going to work hard tonight to try and do the final little details on the set up, electronically specifically, and make the most of it.

Nico, congratulations. I'm sure you've been waiting for this for a little while?

NR: Definitely. It's a great feeling. Fantastic. It worked out well, qualifying, especially as we got it all right in the end. It was a good lap and it all came

together. It's the perfect start until now. I'm really happy for the whole team. It really shows that, as a team, we're moving forward. In qualifying we're very, very strong now. In the race we're still not quite as strong and not where we want to be yet but also there, we're learning a lot and progressing fast. The thing is we can't make huge jumps in a couple of weeks, it's going to take a bit more time, but we're getting there.

You said yesterday that you were struggling a little bit with the front tyres. I guess you weren't in qualifying?

NR: In qualifying, not so much, no! In qualifying it was definitely better. The temperature coming down in the end slightly helped, just helped the rear tyres a little bit. We're depending on that also a lot for tomorrow, then how the conditions are can change things a lot for us. It's difficult to know really how well we're going to go tomorrow. We'll see.

You had an amazing margin over whoever was going to be second at the end. It must have been a funny situation when you were walking down the pit lane and everyone was still trying to beat you?

NR: You can say that for sure. The lap time was very, very strange. I had no idea if the track got a lot better or what was going on out there, so I was just hoping, 'come on, let that be enough, please' and it was, so it was good.

It must have been a perfect lap?

NR: It was, definitely.

Lewis, on the front row again, but sadly, you won't be on the front row again [this weekend]. It looked like a good lap.

LH: Yeah, it wasn't such a bad lap, but I'm pleased to say congratulations to Nico, it's fantastic to see him up there and for us to qualify on the front row, for me, is a quite a cool feeling because we were team-mates back in 2000 and good friends from way before that. We always dreamed of being here on the front row and racing in Formula 1 and here we are. Unfortunately, we won't be able to have that front row, but I'll just have to work my hardest to try to catch him up.

What about that last lap? You aborted it. Were you just not going to be quick enough?

LH: I probably could have gone a tenth quicker but it was very close. It wasn't enough to close the gap to Nico. No one else was improving on their times so it was important to try to save the tyres.

You're a two-time winner here, so what are your chances tomorrow?

LH: I have a lot of work ahead of me. Just moving forward is what I'll be aiming for and obviously to finish the race. Then we'll just see what happens from there. You know anything can happen here with the weather. These guys are going to be massively quick, so I wish them all the best but I just hope me and Jenson can make our way forward and score some valuable points.

Michael, you actually won from sixth on the grid here, that was your best ever grid position here and you've just beaten that by three places. We almost had the sight of Norbert [Haug] dancing in the garage just now, he was so happy. Obviously it's a great result for the Mercedes team.

MS: Absolutely. Norbert has been suffering with us for the last two and a half years. Obviously it's his little baby, to get the Mercedes car up front and to achieve this, with all the effort that Mercedes has put in, the team has put in; it's just great. It's the first front row for Silver Arrows for I don't know how many years; yeah, very proud of this one.

Was this the sort of performance you've been expecting for the last couple of races?

MS: Actually not. Looking at yesterday, I didn't think it would be enough to fight for pole position and looking at what Nico was able to do, obviously I think it's a little surprise for all of us, but nevertheless, the gap looked a little bit bigger than it finally was today and good for us, let's hope we can keep it that way. Obviously the further forward we are the better the prospects are for tomorrow.

Are you quite confident with the tyres for the race tomorrow?

MS: Yeah. No, we don't have a particular problem, it's just a question of how the general speed on high fuel compares to the others, what that means, and then obviously you have tyre degradation, everybody has it, some have more, some have less but for me, I guess it will be the first proper race which I'm hopefully going to finish and I will tell more at the end!

Nico, you only had one run in Q3: was it because you didn't have any tyres any more, or did you save one set?

NR: It was just a decision to save another set of tyres. It was a good lap, I didn't know if it was going to be enough or not, but it was definitely a good lap and saving a set is very good for the race, so we just took the decision to go for that, because the race is where the points are, not in qualifying.

You could have had two runs, did you save a set of tyres beforehand, then?

MS: Yup, same [as Nico].

Nico, what was your feeling when you discovered that you had pole?

NR: First of all, it was strange beforehand because I was standing there on my own and everybody else was still going round, but I couldn't do anything any more, so it was strange. And then slowly but surely, I saw the sector times and I saw that it was definitely going to be enough so fantastic, very excited.

Nico, you said that tomorrow might be good if the temperature goes down a little bit, because it might be better for the rear tyres, but yesterday, wasn't it a problem that the low temperatures created some graining on the front?

NR: Yeah, that's true, that's why it's difficult to foresee tomorrow and our performance compared to the other top teams. We just need to wait. We're in a good position now, we've done our homework over the last couple of days, we've optimised what we have with the knowledge that we have. Of course, we're still learning a lot with the car, a lot of things are different but we will see. Difficult to say.

Michael, you came back last year, and now you're doing well this year and we have Kimi coming back this year. So who's going to be the next former World Champion coming back to Formula 1?

MS: Well, there are plenty of elder champions around so I don't know. Ask around!

Nico, this year you have your first pole, do you feel pressure with Hamilton and Michael behind you?

NR: Of course. Of course I'm very proud, the first pole is great, for the whole team, it's a special moment for the whole team and the first of many moments to come, great results and everything. And it's great to share the qualifying podium here with Lewis and Michael. With Lewis, in the year 2000, we were saying how we imagined one day we were going to be one and two in F1 and now here in qualifying that's the case, so that's nice. Of course, having Michael to share the front row with is fantastic for the team, so it's good.

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – Race report

The 2012 Formula 1 season just keeps getting better.

We started out in Albert Park with a good race, moved on to a stormer in Sepang, and were treated to a vintage grand prix in Shanghai, replete with tyre strategies, overtaking manoeuvres galore, and the first new race winner in 44 F1 weekends.

On his 111th grand prix start, Mercedes driver Nico Rosberg finally broke his duck, making it to the top step of the F1 podium for the first time in his career.

It was an able performance from Rosberg, who led all but eight laps of Sunday's race, delivering a near as dammit lights-to-flag win for the Silver Arrows just as questions were being asked in Stuttgart as to the long-term viability of Mercedes' Formula 1 programme.

But every silver lining has a cloud, and for Mercedes that cloud came in the form of a pitstop error that led to Michael Schumacher's retirement, the only man not to finish Sunday's race.

While McLaren were hampered off the start by Lewis Hamilton's five-place grid penalty, thanks to a gearbox change, the boys from Woking made the best of a not-so-bad situation, finishing 2-3 in China. The team continue to lead the constructors' standings, while Hamilton is now the man to beat in the drivers' championship, thanks to the consistency that was missing in the Stevenage racer's performances last year.

It could have been a better result for the British team, had they not botched Jenson Button's pitstop, leading to the Frome Flyer sitting pretty in his box for 9.7s as he watched the chances of victory slip away.

Red Bull salvaged a respectable result from the afternoon's racing, especially given Sebastian Vettel's struggles in qualifying on Saturday afternoon. The defending world champion was knocked out in Q2 for the first time since Interlagos 2009, and compounded his poor qualifying session with a bad start off the line – by the end of the first lap, Vettel had slipped down to P14.

But Red Bull are nothing if not fighters, and the team came home with a P4 and a P5 in one of the closest runs to the finish in recent F1 memory. Mark Webber was able to pass his teammate for P4 in the closing stages of Sunday's race, despite a mini destruction test for his RB8 on lap 38, in which the Australian driver came close to repeating his aerial acrobatics of Valencia 2010.

It is a testament to the durability of the car that Webber was able to drive competitively for the last 18 laps of the race, passing his rivals on track without making a precautionary pit stop for repairs.

While it might look as though Ferrari had another shocking weekend in Shanghai – the Scuderia's two-point haul from the afternoon left a lot to be desired – it is worth remembering that the Chinese Grand Prix was such a close-fought battle that every millisecond counted. Felipe Massa may have finished in P13, but the Brazilian driver missed a points finish by only four seconds.

The biggest loser of the afternoon was Kimi Raikkonen, whose race was ruined by a poor choice of tyre strategy. For much of the closing stages of the Chinese Grand Prix the Lotus driver looked on course for a strong points finish and possible podium, but the Finn's ailing rubber – which had completed 28 laps without stopping by the time the chequered flag fell – saw the 2007 world champion lose ten places on a single lap after a brief trip onto the marbles while being passed by Vettel.

It was a much more successful day for Raikkonen's Lotus teammate Romain Grosjean, who finished a grand prix for the first time this season. The Frenchman eventually crossed the line in P6, one second behind Vettel.

Williams had their most successful race weekend in recent memory, with both Bruno Senna and Pastor Maldonado finishing in the points. Maldonado saw the chequered flag for the first time this year, while Senna managed to add to his growing points haul.

Less successful on Sunday were Sauber, heroes of the previous race in Malaysia. Thanks to the extremely competitive field, the Swiss drivers were able to bring home a single point from Shanghai, despite decent performances from both Kamui Kobayashi and Sergio Perez.

Chinese Grand Prix results (unofficial)

1. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1h36m26.929s
2. Jenson Button (McLaren) +20.626s
3. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) +26.012s
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull) +27.924s
5. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) +30.483s
6. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) +31.491s
7. Bruno Senna (Williams) +34.597s
8. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) +35.643s
9. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) +37.256s
10. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) +38.720s
11. Sergio Perez (Sauber) +41.066s

12. Paul di Resta (Force India) +42.273s
13. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) +42.779s
14. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) +50.573s
15. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) +51.213s
16. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) +51.756s
17. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) +63.156s
18. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) + 1 lap
19. Timo Glock (Marussia) + 1 lap
20. Charles Pic (Marussia) + 1 lap
21. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) + 1 lap
22. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) + 2 laps
23. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) + 3 laps

Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) RET

F1 Chinese Grand Prix – Sunday press conference

After an absolute stormer of a Chinese Grand Prix, the post-race press conference was a fairly sedate affair.

Present were Nico Rosberg (Mercedes), Jenson Button (McLaren), and Lewis Hamilton (McLaren).

Nico, well done. You join an exclusive club of drivers who've turned their maiden pole into their maiden win. How do you feel?
Nico ROSBERG: Thank you very much. Well, it's an unbelievable feeling; very, very cool. I'm very happy, very excited. It's been a long time coming for me, and for the team as well over the past two years and a bit. Now, it's finally here. It's just amazing and it's just nice to see how quickly we are now progressing. I didn't expect to be that fast today. I expected that we had a good chance to be in front, but I was very happy today with the pace I was able to go in the race.

Jenson, a three-stop strategy for you today, but the third stop really cost you big time didn't it?

Jenson BUTTON: Yeah, it did. But before that our race pace was good, especially on the harder of the two tyres. I had some really good battles out there. And then in my last stop, I stopped on the marks and we had a problem with the rear of the car, so I was stuck there for nine or ten seconds I think it was. It was a pity because when I exited the pits I had four cars in front of me; cars that I wouldn't have been racing, and I would have had a nice clear track to hopefully hunt down Nico. It was a big gap but you've got to give it a go. But, all in all, a fun day. I really enjoyed today. It was a good race, some good overtaking out there and nice to eventually come away with some good points and second place.

Lewis, you started seventh and finished third. Were you surprised by Nico's pace today?

Lewis HAMILTON: We knew that all weekend they had been quick and if we let these people get away it would be hard to catch him, so fantastic for him, congratulations. Your first pole and your first win is an incredible feeling. But I'm very happy to have made it up to the podium. As I said, I wanted to just go forwards and the team did a great job with the pit stops and with strategy. I think it was one of the best races so far this season, just because there was a lot of overtaking and there was a train of us – I think seven cars or something – it was incredible. Yeah, fantastic day.

Nico, there were a lot of questions marks about Mercedes' race pace going into this race. What have you done to the car to improve it so much?

NR: Big thanks to the whole team, because all the engineers especially in the past few weeks have been working very, very hard also, as everybody else has also, just improving the set-up, because we really struggled in the first two races with race pace. Today it all came good. It's great to see just how quickly we managed to progress. It's just fantastic.

Jenson, a key moment for you was obviously the start, you went up from fifth place to third place. Tell us about it?

JB: Yeah, I got a good start. I think all year, so far, we've had very good starts, if not the best starts and [that's] promising when you don't qualify so well. Great job by the whole team for sorting out a special start out for me and great to get up into P3. But I think lastly for me, I'd like to congratulate Nico. We all know how special it is, your first win, and I'm sure there will be many more, just hopefully not too many more this year.

For you Lewis, a lot of battles throughout the race but a very exciting one at the end with Sebastian Vettel. Tell us about it?

LH: It wasn't just with him. It was with everyone really. They [Red Bull] were massively quick on the straight, even when we had the DRS engaged. You had to use all your KERS to get right up behind and obviously you get to the DRS zone and try to use the DRS to catapult past. Finally, I got close enough to do so. I guess he was out a bit longer on his tyres. Nonetheless, he put up a good fight. So did all of them really. I think we lost a little bit of time behind, I think, maybe Pérez. But nevertheless it was still exciting racing.

Finally, back to you Nico. Your father Keke, of course, a grand prix winner and a world champion. What are you going to say on the phone to your dad tonight?

NR: We'll see. Hopefully he's very happy too and I look forward to speaking to him.

Nico, a bit of a packed weekend for you, what with setting records with Mercedes, your first pole, your first win etc. It's all come at once!

NR: Yeah, I know. It's been the perfect weekend. Everything's gone [well]. It couldn't be better. Very happy. It was a great race. It was impressive to see really how we've managed to progress so quickly. We've really had some difficult times in the races, the first two, but we've made a lot of changes, worked hard at it and all of a sudden it's come good. That's been fantastic to see today. I'm just so happy for all of us and I really look forward now to spending some time with the team later on.

Was everything perfect in the car as well, throughout the race?

NR: Perfect? Well, it's never perfect but it definitely felt very good out there.

You didn't seem to have any problems. It seemed to be a trouble-free race for you.

NR: It's never easy, especially taking care of the tyres was a big difficulty and a big challenge today because there was a lot of tyre wear, but it worked out well.

Yesterday you gave the impression that, OK, you're on pole but it was going to be a lot more difficult to win the race – but you won it, it didn't seem to be that much more difficult.

NR: Of course I was a bit careful yesterday because yes, we were on pole but we've seen good qualifying performances all along this year and we've had more difficulties on high fuel in the race, so I wasn't really sure what to expect – but fantastic outcome.

And the tyre strategy, you were happy with that as well, rather than a three-stop?

NR: I think we got it all right today, even tyre strategy. Everybody in the team did a great job, all the different people, my engineers at the start, the strategy, this and that – everything came together.

What you did miss was an incredible battle going on behind you...

NR: I was aware of a bit of that because every lap the name changed of the person behind me – I said 'what's going on back there?'

Jenson, you must love that little DRS thing, that was great, picking them off one after the other.

JB: Yeah, but we made it a little bit harder for ourselves in the last stint with a long pit stop – but hey, these things happen, and the first two were very good. A great race, we went for a three-stop strategy, which was different to a lot of people, it was good fun, even with the problem we had, and the possibility that we could maybe have chased down this guy [Nico]. Even though we didn't have that possibility it was still a great race. I'm very happy to come away with second. I can't remember how many cars I overtook during the race but it was a good fight and most of it was very, very clean, which is good to see. I think we put on a great show for all the viewers and especially all the fans here in Shanghai.

Your race was a little bit easier than Lewis'. Lewis had a little bit of a tougher time I think.

JB: Ah, I don't know. I think when you're in front for the first few laps it always makes it easier. You're dropping the traffic better. Everything was going to plan, I knew I'd have traffic and we were picking them off nicely up to the second pit stop. But after the last stop it was a lot more difficult. Kimi was leading a train of about eight cars and everyone was DRS-ing at the same time, so, until Sebastian had a go at Kimi, I couldn't have a go at Sebastian. It was good fun. Overtaking Sebastian was probably the most fun move of the race, down into the hairpin. Or maybe Grosjean, when I took him before the actual back straight, through the right-hander, that was quite nice as well.

A lot of satisfaction from that I can imagine.

JB: Yeah.

Lewis, I know it's another third place, but you had a great race out there, a lot of people to overtake.

LH: Yeah, I had my work cut out today. It was a fantastic race, I really enjoyed it. As I said yesterday, I just wanted to see if I could move forwards: a good start, good pit stops, good strategy, but what an incredible race with so many World Champions and so many of the great drivers all in a train, just fighting each other. It's great to see racing like that and to see cars so close in pace. It was a little bit unfortunate that there was quite a lot of traffic throughout the race but I'm sure that if we started a little bit higher up it would have been a little bit of a different result for us, but nonetheless, Nico did a fantastic job so congratulations to him. I'm glad we were able to get some good team points today.

How much downforce were you losing in that train, for instance through the corner onto the straight?

LH: You try to stay out of the wake of the car in front, so you take a slightly tighter line which enables you to remain as close as possible. As I said, it just provides great racing. I don't remember being in a race like that for some time so we're doing something right.

Nico, you said you wanted to win with Mercedes, now you have done so, just like Fangio and Stirling Moss. What does that mean to you?

NR: Ah, it's definitely very special, the whole thing, firstly just to win the race, to win my first race is special and everything that comes with it, with the Silver Arrows, with the team that I have, with everybody who has been working together for more than two years now. Yeah, it's a very happy moment.

It's your seventh year in Formula One; do you think that the champagne has come to you too late?

NR: No, I'm not going to say that, no. But I look forward to many more in the future, definitely.

Nico, you said that you have had incredible car development from the last race to this one. Can you give us some details? Is it mechanical, set-up? What exactly explains this?

NR: Well, it's set-up really, really thinking about what's going on in the race and why are we struggling and trying to improve that situation. Surely the conditions helped us today, I think, but even so, we're just moving forward and that's very nice to see. Already from the beginning of the year we've been very strong in qualifying, perhaps more difficult in the race. Now we're still strong in qualifying – very strong, maybe even stronger – and also improving the race, so it's good progress forward and I'm sure that we will continue this ongoing development. It was mainly set-up.

Jenson, you had to wait some time to win for the first time: do you think that Nico can take the same path as you?

JB: We were talking on the podium and yeah, he beat me by two races. I took L3 and he's on L11. It's amazing how, with some people, it can happen very quickly if you can find yourself in the right situation. For others it takes a little bit more time. Which way would you choose? We'd all choose to win immediately, I think. I wouldn't choose my career path and the mistakes that I've made and obviously the good things that have happened in my career – it's just different for all of us. I'm sure that this won't be Nico's first and last win. They – the team – seem very competitive this year and Nico obviously hasn't put a foot wrong all weekend. So I think we're going to have a battle on our hands this year which is good to see.

Nico, when did you make the decision to stop only twice, and when were you sure it was the right strategy?

NR: Well, I think we're very strong on strategy – just great people involved with that as well. We have a lot of competence in the team which is fantastic. Before the race, that was our plan. Of course you have Plan B if things don't go well but things progressed exactly as we had hoped for. The tyres lasted for exactly the amount of laps that we were hoping for so it just all went to plan.

Nico, who will you make the first phone call to? Your dad or [girlfriend] Vivian?

NR: I don't know. I will see.

Jenson, if you had come out in front of the train without the problem at the last pit stop, do you think you could have caught Nico? I think your tyres were five laps younger.

JB: That was obviously the aim but you never know if that's going to be possible. It was a big gap to chase down but before the stop, we had very good pace on new and old tyres so I don't know. That was our aim but it didn't go to plan, but we had a problem at the pit stop which cost us a lot of time – it didn't just cost us time, it cost us places as well, so it made it very difficult to have the possibility to chase down Nico. But that's the way it is.

Sometimes it doesn't quite go your way but I must say that most of the pit stops that we've had this weekend have been fantastic. We've just got to get rid of that bad one.

In a week's time we will be in Bahrain, at what we would expect to be a hotter race; how's that going to affect you? Do you think that you can do the same again – for both Nico and McLaren?

NR: Yeah. For sure we're not where we want to be in the race. I had a great race today but that doesn't mean it's going to be like that at every race. We still need to push hard and continue progressing. Bahrain could be a little bit of a different story again. We need to wait and see. It's difficult to predict. I couldn't have predicted today so we'll just take it as it comes, but for sure I'm looking forward to what's to come because we're looking much stronger.

JB: I'm looking forward to it being hot. We would hope to go even better. I've just struggled – I think everyone has this weekend – with trying to get the tyres in an operating window. It's been so difficult. The change in four or five degrees has been massive difference in car balance. I would rather it to be a little bit more straightforward and we can really get down to business.

Nico, the last time you were leading in China, both of the McLaren drivers won that time. Are you enjoying the fact that these two guys are behind you now?

NR: No, I don't think about that. Not really, no.
