

Fl European Grand Prix – Thursday press conference

With the circus back in Spain for the second time this season – testing notwithstanding – it was the Spanish drivers who were the stars of the press conference show in Valencia.

Present were Fernando Alonso (Ferrari), Lewis Hamilton (McLaren), Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber), Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham), Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso), and Pedro de la Rosa (HRT).

Heikki, you made some comments in your preview that this isn't your favourite circuit: brake cooling so important here and the track evolves more than others. Perhaps you'd like to expand on those comments?

Heikki KOVALAINEN: Good afternoon everyone. Yes, I read that preview and I think our press officer Tom Webb had something to do with that. It doesn't mean I hate the place. I mean look at the weather, look at the circuit. Everything here is actually very, very good here. I've had pretty good races in the past here. I was on the front row with McLaren in 2009, so there's nothing negative for me to say about that. That's all I can say really. I look forward to a good race. It is a street circuit but not as hardcore as Monaco or Montreal. It's easier, the kerbs are easier. It's slightly smoother, we can run the car very low. It's very, very smooth. I think if you just find a good set-up on Friday and Saturday morning I think it's really good fun to drive. In terms of competitiveness, whether we'll be closer to the cars ahead of us or not, it's hard to say yet. We need to wait and see where we are. But I'll definitely look forward to a good weekend. I think everyone here will have a good weekend, the weather looks fantastic.

Just looking overall at the performance so far, over the seven races we've had so far, how do you feel the team is progressing: definitely getting closer to the teams in front?

HK: I think it's fair to say that we were hoping to start the season closer to the cars in front of us. Obviously at the winter testing, we thought we were closer but then we arrived at the first few races we were not as close as we thought. But since then the team has made a lot of effort and in my opinion in all the right areas. I'm very happy to see that. I think we are making good progress. Obviously John Iley from McLaren has joined us very recently and I think in the next few races we'll see updates coming every race. For us they feel like quite significant updates but I think we need to wait and see how they translate onto circuits, actually on to the racetracks before really making too many predictions. The main point being that the team had grown a lot since last year and since the beginning of the year I think we have focused absolutely on the right areas to make that relative gain to the teams ahead of us. Whether we can do it or not, really on track, I think we need to wait and see. I think we can do it and I'm looking forward towards the end of the season more regularly beating the cars ahead of us.

Dan, it's virtually a full year for you in Formula One now, are you pretty much where you want to be?

Daniel RICCIARDO: Good day everyone. It's gone very quick. Someone, probably my dad, told me very recently that it's nearly been a year that I've been here. I remember Silverstone like it was a week ago. Time goes very fast. You have to try and take advantage of every opportunity and make the most of everything so... I've had some good times in the first year and some times I wish were better but generally I'm enjoying it. It's a huge experience and a great learning curve for me but after a year it's time to kick on and get some solid results. As for this season we've been a bit up and down. We kicked it off pretty well in Melbourne and we probably would have liked that to continue, which it hasn't done as smoothly, but yeah, we still have a long season ahead of us. The experience is growing now and I think it's time now to try to get a few more points on the board and to turn a few heads would be nice.

Of course you'll know all the circuits from now on – apart from American, which no one will know – so how important is that? You haven't raced here but you were here as a Friday driver last year.

DR: Yeah, I think it helps a bit. Once you get to this level you can pick up a new circuit fairly quickly but I guess if it's one you've driven on over and over you tend to know a few more secrets about it. But, having F1 here last year will get me into the groove of things a bit quicker but you know come Saturday and qualifying I think everyone's pretty much into it whether it's a new circuit or one we've been to before. There are some special circuits on the calendar, maybe Monaco for example, where the more experience you have there the quicker you'll eventually be able to go, knowing a few more little secrets; knowing which lines to take. But generally I don't think it changes much now. Looking forward to a stronger second half of the season and hopefully that can start here. It's nice and warm, a bit like home – though I haven't really been living at home much in the past six years or something, so maybe it will take me a little bit of time to get used to the heat again, but yeah, looking forward to it.

Kamui, first of all, the Sauber seems to be suited in certain areas and not in others, but what about this circuit?

Kamui KOBAYASHI: Here I think pretty OK. Only we have to focus on working the tyre with this track temperature because this is quite... extremely high. I think the car itself is OK for this track but difficult to say how it will perform on the track in this temperature.

Is it still about tyre management? Your team-mate for example is always cited as someone who will make a one-stop, just as he did here last year. How does that affect you?

KK: I think in the last race Sergio did a really great job with the tyre management. But I think this season so far, it's very important to be [in] clear air. If we are in traffic we damage the tyre of course. It's not only the tyre management, we have to be clear. It's not only the driving, it's the situation as well. It's difficult to say that it's coming only from the tyre and the driving, it's all a mixture. Let's say Sergio last race had great driving but he also had quite a lot of time with not so much traffic and that's the key to managing the tyre. Also last race I think everybody expected in the race to do two-stop but actually one-stop is quicker. But at the same time it seems to be difficult to overtake again because everybody is like a train. So that was mis-predicted for the last race. For my situation I had to change strategy during the race, which is quite difficult. But I think the team did a great job for the performance and they gave us really great advice and we see a good step from the car and we try to understand more the tyre because with this track temperature it's difficult to see but with their experience I think we can sort it out.

Fernando, we read that you team-mate, part of his resurgence is because of a different set-up and he's gone his own way on set-up. How does that affect you? Is it an advantage for you?

Fernando ALONSO: I'm not sure about the different set-up comments. I don't think that there is any big difference compared with the first races. It's not affecting my programme. For Felipe, he's getting some good confidence now in the car with the last changes and some tweaks maybe in the set-up but nothing dramatically changed. And now it seems we can both be competitive. This is the best news for the team. As we always repeat: the team, myself, he's having full support from everybody inside Ferrari and now we are convinced that in the second half of the season we will both be up at the front.

How do you feel about the development of the car? Obviously it didn't start off as a very good car and you were pushing for development. Has it taken longer or shorter than you imagined and now are you nearly there?

FA: I'm extremely happy with the effort of the team. It's true that we didn't start in the best position so maybe in that aspect we were a little bit advantaged because it's easier to improve to a bad car than a good car normally because we had many things that didn't work at the beginning, so maybe it was a little bit easier to put everything right. But it's true that in the last four grands prix or something like that every new part we bring to the race it correlates and is working as we expect from the wind tunnel. This is something we struggled with in the past, in the last two years especially. Yeah, more self-confidence in the team now, in all the new designs, in all the information we get from the wind tunnel, this is good. Not just for now but for the near future.

Lewis, championship leader, three times second at this race, pole in 2009 as well - but it's a very different championship this year, as we're all aware and it's very important to bank points, as you've pointed out in the past. How difficult is that for you - as we see you as an out and out racer who wants to win all the time - how difficult is it for you, is it a change of mindset?

Lewis HAMILTON: Good afternoon everyone. Not for me: I still want to win every race it's just you have to be perhaps a little more strategic with your approach this year. We've seen seven different winners, both me and Fernando have scored pretty much in every race yet the Championship is so close. I don't think there is too much of a different approach but you have to be a little bit more sensible this year.

And, in terms of the Championship again, obviously consistency is hugely important. Is the development still coming all the time from the factory? We hear about it from various other teams, is it still coming from McLaren as well?

LH: The guys are working as hard as they can and pushing as hard as we can to improve. We've not had the same size of upgrades as others potentially have. We've not really had an upgrade since Barcelona but we hopefully will have something very soon.

For here or for the British Grand Prix?

LH: Probably for the British Grand Prix, I would have thought.

Pedro, first of all, problems with the brakes at the last grand prix, do you think you've pretty much sorted those out?

Pedro DE LA ROSA: We are not sure. We think we have and actually we've brought slightly more front brake pulley, which was our limiting factor in Canada, knowing that Valencia is also a little bit easier on the brakes. So, I think, all in all, we should be OK and be able to go flat out all the race and finish this race with the brakes.

How much are you enjoying the development of the HRT team and the car itself? Especially when you get as close as you did in the last grand prix as well, where you were starting to make in-roads with the team in front.

DLR: Well, we're having fun. We're having fun because in the team we are all pushing very hard and we are making progress, which is essential in this sport, especially when you make more progress than the people around you. However, we still have a long way to go and we are not where we want to be and there is still a lot to be gained. But we're having fun because each race we are more competitive, and especially in Canada it was such a shame to retire so early because I was having a lot of fun inside the car. We were able to fight, we were able to fight against people behind and in front and we were actually looking good on strategy. But anyway, let's see how it goes here. Valencia is a similar track to Canada in terms of car setup. Slightly more overall downforce but there are a lot of slow-speed corners and a lot of heavy braking which we seem to be quite good at.

Question for Fernando and Lewis, first of all for Fernando. It seems to be already a silly season but not even for the next one but for 2014 and beyond. It seems to be a lot of rumours, even from your team, about you and Sebastian together. What do you think about the possibility of this cooperation? And for Lewis, about this point, you seem to be a lot more friendly with Fernando now than back to your cooperation. What do you think? Maybe in the future would you like to work together in the same team.

FA: Rumours, I think, with Ferrari are always the same: when I won the 2005 Championship with Renault, I was linked to Ferrari immediately - and I arrived in 2010. So, if Sebastian is linked now, maybe he'll arrive in five year's time. I don't know. Every summer it is the same with Ferrari, as I said, but at the moment we repeat the same thing. Extremely happy with Felipe, whatever team-mate comes in the future will be welcome, will be part of the team and part of Ferrari and, as I said, when I joined this team the most important thing in Ferrari is to help each other to make one red car win. It's something that President di Montezemolo is very clear on when you arrive on day one in Ferrari. So, whatever teammate is coming in the future, if it comes, will be no problem and we will try to work as we are doing now with Felipe.

LH: I really don't know what else to say. It looks like they have a good team already and me and Jenson provide a strong line-up here at Vodafone McLaren Mercedes. That's the thing I need to focus on: that's the most important thing for us at the moment. I don't really know what else I can say.

Question for Fernando: Fernando, would you be happy repeating last year's second place, or do you want to win here, considering this is one of the very few circuits where you haven't won yet?

FA: Well, difficult question. Sure, getting some podiums now, in the next couple of races, especially in July when we have three races in four weeks, it will be important to have some consistency in this very important month, we think. But, being on Thursday, we only think about victory, because we want to win, especially here in Spain, in front of our fans and we will try our best. Difficult question because we know second in this type of Championship is also good points.

Fernando, what do you like on that track, what do you dislike and how do you rate the atmosphere of this venue?

FA: From the track, I like the heavy braking in the last sector especially, which is maybe the most challenging one. The first two sectors are more or less the same. So much straights but they are not really straights so you are always turning in and it's not so easy maybe for overtaking for this reason - but in the last sector you find some interesting combination of corners that I think you enjoy. The high-speed corners plus the last braking which is a little bit challenging. What I don't like from this circuit... nothing really. I think it's all fine. There is not any place or anything that is a big problem.

The atmosphere is one of the best. It's one of my preferred grands prix of the year. I like the city, I like the atmosphere here, there are a lot of activities around the grand prix as well – like Singapore in a way, with a lot of music concerts around. There are some go-kart circuits outside for the fans and some other activities, so I think the weekend overall, with the beach 400m from the track etc., makes something nice for the people that come for the weekend. I think we also like it from a driver point of view.

Lewis, Ron Dennis came out with an interesting comment after the Canadian Grand Prix when he was asked about you staying with the team. He mentioned that you were coming towards the end of a contract that was signed at a time when the economy was somewhat different. He said 'now there has to be a balance.' Can you understand Ron's comments, first of all, and do you appreciate that when it comes down to negotiations with McLaren and yourself and your management team, you might have to ease off on your financial demands because economic times are very different now?

LH: Ron is a very tough negotiator. He was very tough when they negotiated the contract that I have now and I expect him to be the same when we go back in (this time). I don't see there being many problems, to be honest.

Fernando, you know Romain Grosjean pretty well from your experiences at Renault in 2009. In your opinion, what are his best qualities for this season and in which area could he still improve?

FA: Yeah, I know him. We were teammates first as a test driver for us and then racing with us as well. He's a very talented driver. He won GP2 easily and in 2009 in Formula One I think the car was not so easy to drive and he found it tough, but now he's showing his potential. He's young, talented, very quick. He can keep up a very good pace with few mistakes over a whole race. Things to improve? Experience for sure because this is something that you never stop learning and the more races you do, the more championships you do, you improve little things and little tricks at different circuits. A little bit of consistency will only come from experience. I'm happy with his performance, happy for him. I think he will have a very interesting season from now on, after the podium in Canada and the toughest time will only come on Saturday with the football, I think.

Fernando, Pedro and Lewis, I know you are football fans. You are probably following the European Cup. I would like to know what you think about the Spanish team. Are you enjoying them, what do you expect from them, how are you going to follow the match on Saturday, and have you talked to Romain Grosjean?

DLR: Well, I'm enjoying it massively, because we are the best, it's simple, having a great time watching our team – a lot of Barcelona players in the Spanish national team which also helps. It's great to see us doing so well. Actually, I also quite liked what the Spanish coach said the other day, that we go from poor to rich too quickly. I think it's a great competition and we should never forget that all Spain is behind the team and we are all very proud. I don't know who is unhappy about it: no one. Not me.

FA: Yes, same thing. I enjoy it, I watch all of Euro. I will watch Saturday here in the motorhome with some friends. I haven't spoken yet with Grosjean at the moment but I will. Yeah, I'm enjoying it as well, like Pedro. I think we are very privileged to have this national team, this generation of players. Probably, as Pedro and the coach said, we will remember this generation in a few years' time, but now it's very easy to criticise, but we will regret this soon.

I think you're sitting on the fence a bit with your football punditry here folks. What we want to know is who has got the best chance of winning this weekend, Spanish or the English football teams or Lewis or Fernando out on the track? Pedro, you get the casting vote on this one.

DLR: I don't know what you want.

HK: Pedro, you need to talk after this press conference and ask for some money and then you make the comment.

FA: I will not give you money. You can tell Lewis, no problem.

LH: I don't even know when the game is, if I'm honest. Hopefully I will be able to watch it then. They've been playing pretty well recently. I hope that we have a better shot this year than we have in the past, but there are other great teams out there. Spain, of course, is obviously one of the best teams there so it will be interesting. I'm not going to pay Pedro either.

You'll be rooting for Italy, I suppose.

FA: Yes. Sorry, but I prefer Italy in this game.

Lewis, you said in Canada after the race that you weren't able to make a one pit stop strategy. With these hot conditions, do you believe that your car can react well or will it be too hard on the tyres? And regarding your pit stops: you had a problem with your pit stops again in the last Grand Prix and you had to push a lot. Did you work on the pit stops in the last ten days?

LH: On the tyre side of things, I anticipate it could be another very very tough weekend, trying to look after them. I think it will be very interesting to see how the teams vary as they did in the last race. You have to expect teams like Lotus and Sauber doing very very well on their long runs and Ferrari are also very very good on their long runs. So I definitely don't anticipate even doing a one stop strategy this weekend, but I will obviously try to look after the tyres as best we can. In terms of our pit stops, we are constantly altering and improving race by race, and the guys go back to the factory after every race with footage of the pit stop to understand and analyse exactly what went wrong, so that next time we go out we don't have those problems. I think this weekend we will have an even better set of pit stops again. I think at the last race the first pit stop – if we didn't have the problem with the pull away – I think it would have maybe been the fastest of the whole season so far. I think it was 2.8s or 2.9s. The stationary time was 2.9s, I think, or something like that, so quite quick, but I lost a second as I pulled away. We are just going to keep working on it.

Fernando and Lewis, some countries are no longer in the European soccer championship like Holland: some of their soccer players are being criticised for not talking to their fans. Do you feel that Formula One and you as drivers are doing enough for your fans?

LH: Do we think we are doing enough for the fans? I don't know. If you look at the last race, for example, we had such a great event. There are definitely races where there aren't so many people who come to watch the race, but I think we're doing a pretty good job. I don't know what else... I'm sure we can always do better, but I don't see a problem, personally.

FA: Yes, I agree. Anyone can do more or less, depending on which one, but apart from NBA (National Basketball Association) I don't think there's any big sport that does a better job than Formula One.

HK: I think that FOTA has asked the fans many times... Martin Whitmarsh has been very open and the fans have had a word, and I think many times the fans have been happy. I don't see any problem there, no.

We are here in Valencia, Spain and there is an economic crisis in Europe and in Spain particularly. I want to ask a question to Pedro and Fernando: what is your feeling about the economic crisis in Spain and what can you do about it?

FA: I think we obviously feel sad and worried about the situation in Spain which is not ideal at the moment. I think we are in a completely different matter which is sport and we are having a great event in one city which will be known worldwide on Sunday on millions and millions of televisions throughout the world, so it's very good publicity. At the same time, I think the economic crisis is not only in Spain, not only in Europe but worldwide and if we question races and sporting events, we will never finish, because then we have to question why, in Poland, they hold the European Championship, maybe the Olympic Games and so on and so on, because there are macro-sporting events over which there is always a question whether they are necessary or not.

DLR: I fully agree, it's terrible for Spain, it's terrible for Europe, the world. We are in crisis. We have friends in Barcelona who have lost their jobs and it's very bad. But as Fernando said, it's not only in Spain, it's everywhere, I would say. The only thing we can do is first of all concentrate on our job and try to make their lives better with a good entertainment show on Saturday and Sunday and then also, as a team, I think HRT is an example of what you can do in Spain: invest at a difficult moment, give opportunities to young mechanics, engineers, people, drivers and this is what we are doing. It's very bad, but as I've said, crises come and go. It's not the end of the world. We have to look ahead and we have to recover, we have to fight crises and wait for the long straights that will come.

Fernando, how much involvement do you have when teams come to select teammates, wherever you've been. Do they consult you, do they ask you what do you think of him, could you work with him?

FA: In the past, never. Now at Ferrari, yes. I'm in Italy every week so when we are there, sometimes I see the president, I see Stefano (Domenicali – team principal) and we talk about development of the car, we talk about GT, now there is some work on a new GT car that they are doing some test with at the end of year. We talk about the future of Formula One, about Corsa Clienti which is owners of old Formula One cars which they want us to take to some circuits to teach some senior drivers, and also about the future and teammates as well.

So if you said you didn't want A or B would you hope that they listened to you?

FA: I doubt it. It's an open chat, we talk, but in the end, it's their decision.

So would you welcome to chance to work with Lewis again, would that be on the agenda or is that..?

FA: No problem.

Not a problem, no one at all, even Sebastian Vettel?

FA: No problem. Why?

There should be no reason, absolutely, but you would welcome the challenge from whoever would be deemed good enough to be a Ferrari driver or whichever team you were in?

FA: Yeah. I do. I think I have a lot of respect for Felipe. I think the challenging moment, that even from the outside it's difficult to appreciate, what a challenging time he's given to me in the last three years. He's not bad, even if from the outside he looks...

So you wouldn't mind him staying on then? Do you think he could stay on? Has he got the potential to do that?

FA: I think so.

Fernando, Lewis and Pedro: when I saw you in this row, I remembered McLaren in 2007. What were your best and worst memories of that season for you three guys when you were teammates?

DLR: From my point of view it was a pleasure to have two super drivers next to me and learn from them. It was really interesting. The worst bit, clearly, was to lose the championship at the last race in Brazil. I think that the three of us – more them than myself because I was unfortunately not driving – but we all woke up at one point at four or five am in a cold sweat around our heads, because it was a shame but they are the best, it was really a pleasure for me to be in the team with them. I learned. I'm a sponge.

LH: It was the same, losing the championship was definitely the... I had only just got to Formula One but just having it and then losing it and then having it was very very tough. I think the best moment was winning my first Grand Prix that year: firstly getting into Formula One and then having the great opportunity and privilege of working alongside Fernando and Pedro, and working for such a great team, and winning my first race in Montreal. That was part of my life that I could only have ever dreamed of.

FA: Yes, same. The worst moment was losing the championship, for sure, at the last race after being at the top of the table for the whole season, and then we lost it at the last race. Best thing for me was the technical approach that was very different compared to Renault and all the things that I learned on the technical side in that year... I think they were very very important for the rest of my career and I improved 200 percent as a driver that year.

F1 European Grand Prix – F1 report

Pastor Maldonado obviously has a thing for Spanish race tracks. The Williams driver scored his first career victory in Barcelona last month, and this morning went top of the timesheets in Valencia. Given his good form in this country, he might find it prudent to investigate a future in MotoGP should F1 not work out in the long term.

The first practice session of the European Grand Prix weekend was a relatively sedate affair, with no real incidents of note to report despite the proliferation of walls and barriers that litter the street circuit.

In fact, the action was dry enough that Jenson Button's double-front wheel lock-up at Turn 17 mid-way through the session almost qualifies as news. Almost, but not quite.

What was newsworthy on the tyre front was the fact that the entire field elected to stay on Pirelli's medium compound rubber for the duration of F1, instead of making the late switch to softs in an attempt to chase times. But the strong winds and green track conditions will have been a contributing factor there.

With the limited number of tyres available for the weekend, teams have made the tactical decision to save their softs for a time when the track has bedded in and the weather conditions are slightly more representative of those expected for Sunday's race.

Also noteworthy was the time split on the grid, with the first thirteen drivers covered by a single second. We've seen the top sixteen covered by the same amount at recent races, but the fact that the field remains so tight is an indication that qualifying for the grand prix – which is likely to be the traditional procession – should be an absolute thriller.

It is also worth noting, however, that within that one second there was a gap of nearly half a second between Nico Rosberg in P9 and Kimi Raikkonen in P10. Essentially the field is comprised of one fast group covered by three-tenths, a half-second split, and then a second pack of four racers covered by two-tenths.

Further down the field, it appears that Caterham's much-vaunted new floor has had the desired effect, with Heikki Kovalainen lapping ahead of both Toro Rossos. And comfortably so – the Finnish driver was three-tenths faster than Jean-Eric Vergne.

Caterham have recently been working on upgrading their approach to aerodynamics, and technical director Mark Smith and new hire John Iley have put a lot of effort into developing the car within the budgetary restrictions of a smaller team. At the moment, it looks to be paying off.

FP1 times (unofficial)

1. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.40.890s [22 laps]
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.40.973s [21 laps]
3. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.40.984s [19 laps]
4. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.40.994s [19 laps]
5. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.41.065s [26 laps]
6. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.41.105s [15 laps]
7. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.41.117s [22 laps]
8. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.41.158s [18 laps]
9. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.41.182s [21 laps]
10. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.41.620s [22 laps]
11. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.41.784s [15 laps]
12. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.41.838s [19 laps]
13. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.41.861s [16 laps]
14. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.42.109s [20 laps]
15. Jules Bianchi (Force India) 1.42.175s [21 laps]
16. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1.42.299s [24 laps]
17. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.42.442s [26 laps]
18. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.42.758s [27 laps]
19. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.42.777s [28 laps]
20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.43.209s [19 laps]
21. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.44.173s [19 laps]
22. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.44.996s [15 laps]
23. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.45.120s [23 laps]
24. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.45.338s [7 laps]

F1 European Grand Prix – FP2 report

There were two big surprises in FP2 in Valencia this afternoon. The first was the news that pace-setter Sebastian Vettel topped the Friday timesheets for the first time the season, something that would have been unimaginable in 2011.

But the bigger surprise came from Force India, who have spent the season struggling to match the pace of Lotus and Sauber, two teams they were competing with for the duration of last year. Something magical – possibly in the form of the aero upgrades the team brought to Spain – has happened to the VJM05, with both Nico Hulkenberg and Paul di Resta giving their rivals something to think about.

Caterham continued to perform well this afternoon; while Heikki Kovalainen was unable to get ahead of both Toro Rossos, as he had done in the morning session, the Finnish driver stayed ahead of Jean-Eric Vergne. Vitaly Petrov was significantly faster in the afternoon than he had been in the morning; the Russian ended FP2 in P17, two-tenths ahead of Ricciardo and three-tenths ahead of Vergne.

Yet again, the timesheets showed a tightly-packed field, with the first fifteen drivers covered by a single second. All indications are that Saturday's qualifying session will be a closely-fought battle the likes of which the Valencia street circuit has never seen before.

But despite the close competition, it was a session that saw a variety of technical difficulties for drivers up and down the field.

Tyre degradation was the main source of complaint; despite the comparatively cool conditions on offer this afternoon drivers were suffering from high rear tyre wear, with some complaining that the supersofts were falling off the cliff after a single lap.

Despite the complaints, however, it was a session fairly free of incident. The biggest moment of drama came about courtesy of local hero Pedro de la Rosa, who put his HRT into the tyre barriers at Turn 14, damaging his suspension in the process. But the session continued without being red-flagged, and the rest of the afternoon saw little more than missed apexes, brief runs off track, and a Turn 17 spin from Sauber's Sergio Perez.

Worthy of note were McLaren's struggles this afternoon; neither driver was happy with the overall balance of the car. Lewis Hamilton's problems were general, and could be fixed if the team are able to find the right set-up tweaks during FP3, while teammate Jenson Button was suffering as the result of attempts to alleviate brake locking which only led to further issues elsewhere in the car.

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.39.334s [33 laps]
2. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.39.465s [32 laps]
3. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.39.595s [20 laps]
4. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.39.601s [27 laps]
5. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.39.644s [34 laps]
6. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.39.700s [32 laps]
7. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.39.733s [34 laps]
8. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.39.868s [33 laps]
9. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.39.901s [30 laps]
10. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.39.926s [32 laps]
11. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.39.945s [34 laps]
12. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.39.990s [33 laps]
13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.40.075s [29 laps]
14. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.40.147s [25 laps]
15. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.40.244s [35 laps]
16. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.40.511s [29 laps]
17. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.40.963s [20 laps]
18. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.41.121s [32 laps]
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.41.197s [38 laps]
20. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.41.263s [29 laps]
21. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.42.424s [21 laps]
22. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.42.958s [30 laps]
23. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.44.201s [33 laps]
24. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.44.260s [12 laps]

FP1 European Grand Prix – Friday press conference

It was the turn of the senior team personnel to face the media, and face them they did, answering exhaustive questions about cost-cutting and the future of Formula One in Europe.

Present were Riad Asmat (Caterham), Eric Boullier (Lotus), Norbert Haug (Mercedes), Luis Perez-Sala (HRT), and Franz Tost (Toro Rosso).

Franz, as it's your first time in the press conference this year, can you give us an assessment of your two new drivers? They've had time to settle down. Two drivers for whom there are a lot of new circuit too.

Franz TOST: Yes. Daniel Ricciardo, our driver from Australia, he is a little bit more experienced, he did already 11 races last year. So far he is doing a good job. He is a highly skilled driver. He is committed, with a positive attitude and so far I must say he is really doing a good job. Jean-Eric Vergne, his new, a French driver. Last year he did Formula Renault 3.5 litre and of course all the tracks are new for him. It's not so easy, Friday morning, in the first session is to learn the tracks. But also he is a highly-skilled driver. I rate him very high. He is doing a good job and improving from race to race and if we provide the drivers with a good car they show a good performance.

The car itself: Is the team able to ensure that the car is maintaining a good position, even catching the teams in front?

FT: We started the season quite successfully with ninth place in Melbourne for Daniel Ricciardo and then eighth place in Sepang with Jean-Eric Vergne. Then afterward, I don't know, we struggled a little bit. Our direct competitors improved their performance, Williams as well as Force India. They are clear in front of us. We brought some new parts here. We have to analyse the data and everything and hopefully set-up the car in a good way tomorrow for the qualifying and then for Sunday for the race. But there is a lot of work in front of us because currently the gap increased instead of decreasing.

Riad, first of all, I think you've got some developments here, but how much more can you do. How much closer can you get to the teams in front this year?

Riad ASMAT: I think what we've done is obviously going to be a progression but there is a huge push back home obviously with the team we have currently. We have some parts here, hopefully again we evaluated them today and if we get the set-up right for tomorrow then maybe we will pull a lucky one. But I'm more looking forward towards Silverstone and onwards where more developments are being done for the car and hopefully by year's end we'll be able to prove our worth, where we actually aim to be this year.

And you've got changes to the team. The team is moving and you have John Iley now as well.

RA: Yes, it's been positive. We had a real look over the past three years in terms of what we've done in terms of investment and in terms of people. More importantly people – the latest being John. He's been with us a couple of months now and he's actually very influential now with the performance levels we're aiming for. Again, we'll be moving to Leaffield in August. I think that's a definite plus for us. It's a bit tight for us now in Hingham but with the ambitions we have currently I think Leaffield is the right place for us.

Norbert, a certain amount has been made of the fact that you've had four mechanical failures on one car and the other one has done every single racing lap. How easy is it to explain that?

Norbert HAUG: Well, things like that happen. This is not our plan and we are not satisfied with these results for sure. I really feel sorry for Michael. This should not be the case, these are not our standards; the team can do a better job. But we need to have a calm and concentrated approach and I think all my colleagues here have been through phases like that. That happens in Formula One if you're pushing and on the limit. But still, it is not our plan to be like that for sure. We will fix that. A lot of people are working in a concentrated and focused manner. Michael is a perfect team player and I would have every understanding if he would be critical but he never is outside the team, so he fully supports the team and we support him. I think he

is an example for each and every driver. His behaviour is just first class and so authentic. I rate that very, very highly. Going through thick and thin he could complain and say 'I should have as many points as Nico' or stuff like that, but you never hear that. He's a professional and he deserves good results. I hope they will come sooner rather than later. And again, he deserves that. We need to give him a fully competitive and fully reliable car and we're working hard to achieve that.

We're only a third of the way through the season, do you think Nico can win the world championship. Do you think Mercedes can be a world championship-winning team?

NH: Well, I think that whatever we did in the past, we have had at the last race the 300th race together with our partner McLaren-Mercedes and they won 73 grands prix. So we have been here for quite a while but what I think we never did is make any predictions or announcement saying 'we are going to win the next race or fight for this or that'. We do our best job and we are doing it in a focused and concentrated manner. I think if you see that we have had two difficult at the beginning, Nico being on the last lap in Australia eighth and then he had a coming together with another car and lost points eight points and was 35 points down to the leader and now he's 21 points down, so this is certainly the right direction. But we need to score points on a regular basis, we need to hopefully win more races and we are working, again... very focused on the direction. I think if you look at today, Nico did the fastest time on the prime tyre and then he was on the option. But he had this handicap of a yellow flag. Whatever Friday times mean, he would have been in a position to probably post the quickest time. And then the long runs look quite good. I don't know what that means compared to the others because you obviously do not know the fuel loads but our lap times were consistent. I think they have been in Canada. We have been very competitive in Monaco and we won in China. So the last five races I think we had three times good and convincing speed to be at the top or to mix with the top guys. Hopefully we can continue that trend. I would never go so far as to say we are definitely fighting for the world championship but of course it has to be the ultimate target. If we can achieve it, it would be fantastic and it would be our ultimate goal for sure.

Luis, first of all, brake problems in Canada. Have you got them beat here, do you feel - as this is quite a tough circuit on brakes as well.

Luis PÉREZ-SALA: Yes, we knew from the beginning, from Melbourne, that our brake ducts were not perfect. We knew that Montreal was the biggest, maybe most difficult track for the brakes and here is one as well, one of the tracks where you can have problems with the brakes. But the data that we have this morning suggests we are going to be close to the limit but inside the limit.

Yesterday Pedro [de la Rosa] said how much he was enjoying bringing the team up, advancing the team. How much are you enjoying it?

LPS: Ha-ha! Really, I'm struggling a lot! But what is for me the worst thing of Formula One is that you have to travel a lot and be abroad from your house and far from the family. But this is a world that I like and I'm happy to be here and I try to push, to keep pushing, to try to get the team better and better each day.

Eric, many times we've been told that Lotus is ready to win. The question is which driver? Who would you put your money on?

Eric BOULLIER: I never put money on anything or anybody. I just wish one of my two drivers is going to be the eighth man, maybe this weekend. But rather than focussing on who will be the eighth man winning, I think it's in our philosophy just to improve ourselves, to work hard, to clearly look at ourselves, to be better, to improve our weaknesses to make sure that we keep this consistency first - and if we can score podiums as well it is very important for the championship. And if we can have a win obviously I will be the most delighted guy.

Are you able to keep on top of development? Are you happy with the rate of development?

EB: Yeah, definitely. In 2010 we had a very strong rate of development, last year we had a strong rate but not as successful as we would have expected. This year is still good development: we have some good parts and good improvement in performance package that we bring not every race but nearly.

To all the gentlemen. As for the economic situation in Europe, do you think it will influence Formula One? Especially to all tracks in Europe in the future?

LPS: We have economic problems in my house - in my team! I think it is for everybody, economic problems, I think not only in Europe. Europe now is focussing on the situation but it's something that we have and of course it's going to touch us in some way. But this is still... I think this is not from this year: it's come in from the last three or four years.

And is it going to affect Formula One?

LPS: Of course it's touching us in some way. We are getting less money from sponsors: you have less money to spend on the cars, on the team.

Do you see the effect as well Norbert?

NH: Well, I mean the general issue is that we have to have this - however you call it - resource restrictions, limits, whatever - who does not see that? Who does not see what's going on? We have to have limits, you know the figures of the medium and high class teams as good as I do. There should be limits of how to achieve it: that needs to be discussed but I think there are quite constructive and good ideas but we need to make sure that this comes through. This is an important step coming to the economic situation. I think that is part of the challenge. We have had bigger challenges in the past and I'm sure we will have even bigger ones in the future. You have some ups and downs and I think these times are very good for learning. You will always learn. You will learn how to be more efficient - so there are also positives. We just need to deal with the facts.

Franz?

FT: For sure it's not good, the economic crisis in Europe and we are also working in Formula One to come down with the costs but thanks to Bernie we are not only racing in Europe, we are racing in areas where there is some money and no economic crisis: like India, like Australia, like Canada, like Brazil and like Saudi Arabia, with Bahrain and Abu Dhabi. We go to Russia, we are in China and I think that's very, very important for Formula One, especially for the sponsors to be present all over the world. And this also prevents a major influence from the economic side on Formula One. Because all over the world, hopefully there is no crisis.

Riad, perhaps a comment from you?

RA: I think, I mean it's a given, the economic crisis is not just this year, I have to agree, it's been around for the last two years. But the fact is that it affects everyone around the world and business-wise obviously Formula One. As a team commercially you will be affected because the companies that want to be part of it will have to reduce their marketing budgets, so on and so forth. That being said, I agree with Norbert: we do need to look at what we're doing internally and be more precise and be more resource restricted to a degree. It's a matter of the business that we're running at the end of the day: I have to make it as efficient as possible in the hope that we can sustain our being here. But it's a given, we can't avoid it, it's there. We just

have to be smarter – and one of the areas is to manage our own resources, and hopefully with us working together maybe we'll find a solution.

Eric?

EB: I will do a résumé, I guess, of what has been said. We have to be sensitive to this economic crisis especially in Europe. And we have to monitor also us being based in Europe. We have the chance, as Franz says, that Bernie's business model for Formula One is global. Our sport is the only global sport in the world, so thanks to this global platform, we, as a team, for example, have been able to bring some big names and new sponsors, like Microsoft, who were never in the Championship in Formula One. Obviously we don't have to hide behind this, we have to be very careful about the impact of the economy in Europe but we are lucky that our sport is global.

To all five of you: a lot has been made recently about the cost-cutting, cost-saving measures in Formula One. Enshrining them in the regulations was discussed after Monaco on the Monday, it was discussed last week on Friday in the WMSC meeting. I believe you people had a follow-up meeting yesterday. Has anybody got any reservations about enshrining the cost-saving measures or cost-cutting measures, budget caps – whatever you want to call it – in the Formula One regulations?

EB: It's true that actually it's a good follow-up after the previous question. If you monitor the economical situation in some parts of the world, you obviously have to consider yourself and think not only that you're plus one, you're plus two but also you're plus five. And it's true that there are some very constructive discussions between the FIA, Bernie and teams today, to try to take conscience and to try to clearly understand what is Formula One and what will Formula One be in the future and what we want to do with Formula One. Formula One has already downsized its costs a lot but we believe there is some more work to be done and this is why there are all these discussions, but the more people around the table, the less easy it is to take radical decisions.

FT: We are discussing the resource restriction agreement. Currently we are mainly only discussing about the resource restriction agreement regarding the chassis. In my opinion, the chassis resource restriction agreement is one point but the costs – especially from 2014 onwards, which will come up and which will increase dramatically – is the powertrain, and therefore the resource restriction agreement for the powertrain would be for me or let me say for Toro Rosso even more important than for the chassis. It must be a complete package. I am really worried that we are discussing on one side the costs decrease, but from 2014 onwards, with this new powertrain and the new engine, with the new ERS system, pick-up batteries, the cost will dramatically increase and this is what we also have to discuss, which is quite important, the development and the research costs which will rise to develop this package.

NH: You need to deal with the facts. The engine lease years ago was twice as much as it is right now, that's due to manufacturers bringing that down. I think that was a big help for all the teams. It's very clear that if you develop a new engine that it costs money and I think Formula One has never had an engine formula like today, where basically everybody gets a competitive engine, ten teams at least. That needs to be mentioned. Then there was a process in the past deciding that a new engine has to be developed and of course that costs money. We worked very hard, together with the FIA, and we have the same opinion with the other manufacturers to bring costs down but this is over a period of five years, so the target has to be minus twenty, minus thirty percent over five years and I'm sure the engine lease will, over five years, be comparable to what we have right now, but we need to see that we will have a new engine, an engine that you can market in a very good way, if it comes to sustainable ??? and so on. We just need to have changes. I hear some voices saying 'delay the engine.' One thing is for sure: if you delay the engine, you run two programmes in parallel one year longer and your customers will pay for that. We cannot have fully subsidised engines, this is not possible. I think the engine manufacturers especially have been very very fair and I would be pleased to hear that at one stage as well, because the engine lease was in excess of 25/30 million years ago and we brought it down, and I think that fact has to be mentioned. We can discuss aerodynamics and so on and so on. There are lots of areas where we can save money, but deciding and building and developing a new engine costs money – much less money than the last one, the V8, but we need to see where we are. I'm the first guy to support restrictions but then we need to do it in a coherent way: chassis, engine, whatever. Mercedes has always been one of the driving forces. I'm sure the Renault guys do not see it differently, the Ferrari guys do not see it differently. If we all work together we will achieve our targets but one thing is for sure: just listening to voices saying the engine is more expensive than it used to be. Let's deal with the facts and then we know where it's coming from.

RA: We've had numerous meetings on this matter but one thing is for sure is that everyone agrees that we need to reduce costs. I've been in this for two and a half years and I can see the level of exorbitant areas that could be managed better. The points are taken, we have discussed it. There are some ideas bandied around. The groups that are related to those areas will be talking to each other and hopefully soon enough we do come to a conclusion, but we have a position, obviously, and we will support anything with regard to resource restriction, we will support that all the while. I think there has been some improvement over the last two years from previous times, but there is a lot more we can do, I think, going forward. From our side, we will support anything that's positive.

LPS: It's clear that for the biggest teams there are going to be clear rules. They are going to reduce their budgets but I'm a bit worried about the small teams like us. To reduce our budget is not easy but even to stay with the same budget, I would say, will be difficult, because maybe next year it will be at the same level but we will need to understand how the situation will be in 2014, as Norbert says, what will be the cost of the KERS, the engine, to have a clear view of the future for us, maybe in five years' time. I'm quite happy with Norbert that the engines have reduced a lot. I was not involved in Formula One as I am now but I remember the cost was large, maybe four or five times what it is now but I would like to maintain this level of costs for the future. It seems that it is going to be difficult, or we have to understand what the situation will be.

Sorry, the question was – thanks for all the detail – but the question was does anybody have any reservations about including the cost-saving measures in the Formula One regulations?

LPS: I don't think so. Does anybody?

(General shaking of heads and 'No')

Autosport today is reporting that customer cars are back on the table – second hand cars from the previous year. Is that something that's right for Formula One which is supposed to be the technological pinnacle of motorsport? And is it something that any of your teams would be looking at either supplying or purchasing?

NH: I think that's very easy to answer. If you ran this year with last year's car then just guess what happens.

LPS: Maybe for a small team it's going to be at the beginning this year, some years, like in 2014. There are a lot of changes, it's not easy because they're changing the engines, it's not an easy thing to do.

EB: The question is easy but the debate is more complex. Today's Formula One is based on constructor regulations. If we have to go to customer cars to serve Formula One and be the Formula One of the future, why not? I think the discussion is open now. I know some teams would like to stay as constructors, some teams would maybe need to be customers to save their budget or their company, but it's a more complex debate and actually together with the previous question about cost-saving, it's obviously crucial in this discussion.

FT: It depends how much money a team has. The customer teams can buy the car and can run the car. We at Toro Rosso have started to build up the infrastructure and will build the car by ourselves.

RA: From our point of view, again, we're a constructor. We came in with that particular objective and we've been doing it for the past two and a half years. But again, an idea is an idea. We're always open to ideas and obviously we will have to review things if it does come to fruition then go from there. But we are proud of where we are, what we've built. We came in as a constructor, as Eric mentioned, and we hope to stay that way for now.

We are talking about cutting costs, reducing costs and so on, and there is the rumour that the number of Grand Prix could increase. The number on the calendar could be larger. I can understand that more Grand Prix means more money for everybody but in your opinion, what is the ideal calendar for the future: twenty, 24? How many Grand Prix in Europe, because the crisis is deeper here in Europe?

FT: The year has 52 weeks. We should have 26 Grand Prix! Some in Europe, yeah!

EB: I think you have two philosophies. Is it going to be like NASCAR with 38 weekends, if I'm not wrong, or staying around twenty. The true question is over 20 Grand Prix we have to reconsider our structure, because we obviously have a team personnel issue, travelling and logistical issue. As you say, we can speak about cost-saving but more Grand Prix means more revenue for Formula One and the more countries we can visit is the more countries we can bring Formula One to fans. There is no exact number, no magic number I guess, but I'm rather like Franz - more races, why not?

FP European Grand Prix – FP3 report

The final practice session of the European Grand Prix weekend was a fairly staid affair.

Jenson Button topped the timesheets thanks to an aborted final lap from Sebastian Vettel that would have clocked in at 1m38.2s, putting the Red Bull driver in a strong position for pole on Sunday.

But despite his semi-artificial spot atop of the timesheets, it was a positive morning for the McLaren driver, who has been struggling to get the car working to his liking, both over the course of this weekend and at the most recent grands prix. Instead it was the turn of teammate Lewis Hamilton to struggle to find the ideal set-up; the 2008 world champion ended FP3 six-tenths down on the man in the matching machinery.

On the face of it, and without having studied Vettel's sector times on that aborted lap, it would appear that Red Bull are struggling this weekend. Mark Webber was sidelined with brake issues for most of the session, and was able to complete only four laps before trouble struck. Vettel's best recorded time saw the defending champion nearly a second down on Button's pace-setting time. But the devil is in the details, not on the timesheets.

What has been interesting to note over the course of this weekend's three practice sessions has been the stark effect of track temperatures on the timesheets. There have been different drivers at the top of the timesheets in every session, and little consistency elsewhere in the standings.

Friday morning was windy and relatively cool, and Pastor Maldonado went fastest in the Williams. But the warmer afternoon – and rubbered in track – saw the man of the morning languishing in the middle of the timesheets as Vettel went fastest for the first Friday this season.

Today is noticeably hotter – and breezy, not windy – and the Red Bull looked to be 0.3s faster than the McLaren over the course of a single lap. As the track gets warmer between now and qualifying, that advantage could increase further still.

It will be interesting to see how tomorrow's weather compares with the conditions we've had over the course of the weekend, as the narrow operating window of this year's rubber – and the varying abilities of the teams and drivers to manage their tyres – is likely to have a far greater influence on the race's outcome than at recent races.

FP3 times (unofficial)

1. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.38.562s [17 laps]
 2. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.38.655s [18 laps]
 3. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.38.759s [18 laps]
 4. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.38.819s [17 laps]
 5. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.38.892s [17 laps]
 6. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.39.084s [20 laps]
 7. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.39.141s [15 laps]
 8. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.39.178s [17 laps]
 9. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.39.318s [15 laps]
 10. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.39.357s [18 laps]
 11. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.39.358s [19 laps]
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 13. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.39.434s [13 laps]
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 15. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.39.946s [20 laps]
 16. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.40.037s [17 laps]
 17. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.40.134s [20 laps]
 18. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.40.681s [15 laps]
 19. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.41.282s [4 laps]
 20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.41.931s [15 laps]
 21. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.42.758s [14 laps]
 22. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.42.815s [16 laps]
 23. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.42.943s [14 laps]
 24. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.43.124s [16 laps]
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F1 European Grand Prix – Q1 report

Shortly before qualifying started Marussia announced that Timo Glock would be skipping the session, thanks to the return of a stomach bug the German driver has been battling all weekend. Glock is currently seeking medical attention, and it remains to be seen whether he will be fit enough to race tomorrow, stewards permitting.

As for the session itself, when the pitlane opened for business the track temperature was a scorching 45 degrees, while the air was a relatively cool – for this part of the world – 26 degrees.

The first sets of times were set on Pirelli's medium tyre compound, which appears to be around a second per lap slower than the softs in current conditions.

While the times at the top are largely irrelevant at this stage in the game, the list of names at the top of the timesheets is very familiar: Lewis Hamilton, Felipe Massa, Fernando Alonso, Michael Schumacher, Jenson Button...

Missing from that list are the Red Bull pair. Sebastian Vettel didn't set out on a flyer until there were only eight minutes remaining, while Mark Webber – who missed a lot of running in FP3 following brake problems – didn't start his first timed lap until the final five minutes.

As a result, the dropout zone was comprised of the six usual suspects plus Webber for much of the session, with Jean-Eric Vergne hovering on the edge in P17. Webber's first attempt saw him cross the line in a P16-worthy 1.40.431s, but Vergne crossed the line seconds later with a 1.40.244s, knocking Bruno Senna into the dropout zone and returning Webber to P17.

It's a very tight field, with the first 15 drivers covered by 0.9s.

With two minutes remaining, Senna saves himself with a 1.39.449s, and Webber was back in the dropout zone. Vergne is once more dancing on the edge in P17.

Towards the end of the session it was announced that Kamui Kobayashi was under investigation by the stewards for impeding Nico Hulkenberg.

The chequered flag has fallen, and it's a fight between Webber and Vergne to stay in the fight. But the Red Bull driver's last chance at a flying lap saw a poor first sector – Webber is out in Q1, joining the six usual suspects.

At least, that's what it looked like until Heikki Kovalainen's final lap pushed Vergne into the dropout zone. Caterham have got the pace to fight in Q2, and good luck to them.

Dropout zone

18. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso)
19. Mark Webber (Red Bull)
20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
21. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT)
22. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)
23. Charles Pic (Marussia)
24. Timo Glock (Marussia)*

* Timo Glock sat out the session as a result of a stomach bug. It has yet to be confirmed whether he will be cleared to race.

F1 European Grand Prix – Q2 report

Mark Webber was the high profile scalp claimed by Q1 in Valencia; the Red Bull driver lost a lot of running time this morning thanks to brake and hydraulics issues, and paid the price for the lost track time this afternoon. Further complicating the Australian's efforts were gear selection and DRS issues.

The high point of Q1 came about thanks to Heikki Kovalainen, who put in a banzai lap after the chequered flag fell, putting Caterham into the Q2 fight in standard weather conditions for the first time in the team's history.

Unfortunately it looks as though Caterham have elected to keep their driver in the garage for Q2, denying him the opportunity to fight for a higher position. But it is the same strategic rubber conservation argument we're used to seeing in Q3, and there's little use in rehashing old frustrations.

Times at the top of the sheets are changing by the nanosecond – early pace-setter Pastor Maldonado had been pushed down to P12 before the session was half-run.

At the bottom of the back, the McLaren pair were the last of the big names to leave the pits: both drivers waited until the session was half run before they headed out on track. But both drivers crossed the line in P3 on their first timed lap, with Jenson Button knocking Lewis Hamilton down into P4.

With times on the board from all but Kovalainen and a very quiet race track before the soft runs get going, the dropout zone is comprised of Bruno Senna, Fernando Alonso, Sergio Perez, Felipe Massa, Maldonado, Daniel Ricciardo, and Kovalainen.

As the session neared its end, Kovalainen confounded expectations by leaving the garage with enough time spare to squeeze in a minimum of two runs, should he be able to eke the performance out of his tyres.

Little more than a minute to go and the dropout zone is comprised of Romain Grosjean, Massa, Michael Schumacher, Senna, Perez, Ricciardo, and Kovalainen. On the edge in P10 is Sebastian Vettel, currently on a flyer.

Vettel crosses the line in P3, and it's Alonso's turn to sit on the precipice.

Grosjean lifts himself up to P1, knocking Alonso out of Q3 – that's both Ferraris out of the fight, and in the presence of Ferrari president Luca di Montezemolo.

And while all that was going on, Kovalainen crossed the line in a P16-worthy 1.40.295s, legitimately out-qualifying both Toro Rossos. It's been a good day for Caterham.

Dropout zone

11. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
12. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
13. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
14. Bruno Senna (Williams)
15. Sergio Perez (Sauber)
16. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham)
17. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso)

F1 European Grand Prix – Q3 report

After a thrilling Q2 that saw Heikki Kovalainen qualify his Caterham in P16 and the top ten runners covered by 0.2s we should be in for an absolute treat of a Q3.

Romain Grosjean went fastest moments before the end of the session, and the smart money is on a Lotus in the front row – if not on pole – for tomorrow's race.

Kimi Raikkonen was the first to put a time on the board, and by the time the session was half-run only Jenson Button, Lewis Hamilton, and Nico Rosberg had joined him. Rosberg crossed the line in 1.38.623s, two-tenths faster than Button's provisional P2 time.

Pastor Maldonado was on a flying lap, but the Venezuelan driver aborted it after an error in the final corner that saw him running wide into the run-off before diverting for the pits.

Two-and-a-half minutes remaining, and there are still only four times on the board. All ten drivers are out on track, and no team has elected to sit out the session to save on rubber.

Grosjean crosses the line in 1.38.505s, good enough for provisional pole, but he's got nine challengers out to beat him. Based on initial sector times, the Force Indias look like they might challenge Grosjean for pole, but Maldonado beats them to it with a 1.38.475s.

Paul di Resta stuffed up his final sector somewhere; the Scottish driver's first timed lap was only good enough for P7 before being pushed back to P8 by other times.

Sebastian Vettel does what many were expecting after that aborted FP3 lap, and claims provisional pole by a dominant three-tenths on his first flying lap. Hamilton crosses the line in 1.38.410s, good enough for P2, and there are no realistic challengers left on track to usurp the Red Bull driver.

Provisional grid

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

19. Mark Webber (Red Bull)
20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
21. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT)
22. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)
23. Charles Pic (Marussia)
24. Timo Glock (Marussia)*

* Timo Glock sat out the session as a result of a stomach bug. It has yet to be confirmed whether he will be cleared to race.

F1 European Grand Prix – Saturday press conference

It was probably the most exciting qualifying session that the Valencia street circuit has ever seen. Trying to make sense of it were the three fastest men on track.

Present were Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), Lewis Hamilton (McLaren), and Pastor Maldonado (Williams).

Congratulations Sebastian, a third pole in a row at this race and only one flying lap in Q3 to try to do it.

Sebastian VETTEL: Yeah, one shot there in the end, which turned out to be a very good lap. Q1 and Q2 were not to our liking. We were struggling to find the balance we did have early on this weekend, yesterday and this morning during practice. Yeah, good recovery throughout qualifying. Unfortunately, we had to put a second set of options in Q2. It was the right call because it was very tight. I think my time would not have been good enough, I set with the first set. So it was good to go again. But then in the last qualifying I knew that going at the end if the track comes in a little bit more and tying the lap together it should be good enough maybe to look at pole. In the end it was a surprising gap but all in all I felt very well this weekend. The boys have been working incredibly hard in the garage, all the people in the factory as well to make sure that we bring a couple of new parts to the car. They seem to work and I'm looking forward to the race tomorrow.

Lewis, a front row for you. Sebastian says it was a surprising gap at the end. Did you expect it to be much closer in Q3?

Lewis HAMILTON: To be honest, I expected to be a lot further back. We've struggled all weekend, just with set-up and you know going from P3 to qualifying we had to make some guesses as to what kind of set-up we wanted to change. It seemed to work OK and I'm really, really surprised. The guys obviously did a great job, as always, to get me a good gap and while the car still felt pretty good, I think the gap is still pretty big here and it will be a tough race tomorrow for sure, as always.

Is that just the way it is in 2012 then? You go from winning one race weekend and on the next one you struggle and you're not quite sure where you are?

LH: I think so. At least it appeared so when we first started practicing here yesterday. But generally, I think, you look at the grid, because it's so hot, the Lotus cars look massively competitive. I think they're going to be the ones to watch out for tomorrow. I'm sure the Ferraris will be very quick on their long runs as well. Who knows what's going to happen tomorrow, we just have to look after our tyres in these tricky conditions.

Yes, 2012 is unpredictable, but Pastor, one is for certain, you quite like Spain don't you?

Pastor MALDONADO: I think we've been working so hard. The car has been quite quick from yesterday. We were struggling a bit with the option tyres. We were confused because I didn't feel the same feeling with the prime tyres but then we've working so hard trying to understand what was happening with the car this morning, still struggling, especially with the option tyres. But for quali we understand a little bit the way, and here we are. I think we did a pretty good job. Williams is getting better and better every time. I'm pretty happy for the team, pretty happy for my country and it's going to be a great opportunity to get on the podium and fight for a good result.

You did, though, use seven sets of tyres during the course of that qualifying hour. How much of a disadvantage does that put you at for tomorrow's race?

PM: I think for the long run, for us, the prime tyres were a bit better. We had more range and they were even quicker after a couple of laps. We have tyres enough to race and get very competitive. I'm not worried about that. I'm looking forward to tomorrow. We'll see from the start what happens with the strategy, that will be very important, essential for tomorrow. These conditions are very hot and very difficult for everybody. So looking forward, let's see.

Finally, back to you Sebastian. Lewis has outlined some of the potential battles for tomorrow's race. Where do you see the big threat coming from, or have you, by saving a set of tyres, ensured that you'll make it a hat-trick of victories as well?

SV: Well, it would be nice, no doubt. I think it's going to be a difficult race. Difficult to predict. We have seen too much this year to be honest to sit here on Saturday afternoon and predict what's going to happen. I think it's probably easier to guess the result tonight in football than tomorrow. It's less hard than predicting the ranking tomorrow. I think it's going to be tough, as Pastor touched on. It's going to be hot tomorrow – a bit hotter than today even. So yeah, there will be obviously a lot of cars to look out for tomorrow. I think Ferrari has been very competitive. Williams have been quick yesterday on their long runs. Lotus, I think they've proven in Bahrain, the first time we had hot conditions, that they're up there. So, I think this year obviously grid position is important but maybe not a

Sebastian, well done, your third consecutive pole, does that mean it's going to be followed by your third consecutive win? Or does that not mean anything any longer in 2012?

SV: Well it does, so it would be nice, I think... I'm very happy to be here now because, to be honest, we had a very good weekend. Yesterday was very good, I felt comfortable in the car, this morning I felt very good, even though we didn't get to finish the run on the soft tyre but this afternoon we started and I think we were a little bit off, compared to where we were the whole weekend. And we played a little bit of catch-up through Q1 and Q2: you don't have that many runs. And we had to go out again in Q2. It was very tight. We saw I think Fernando was just not quick enough for Q3 and I think I was a little bit slower than that, so if we could have stayed in the garage then, yeah, we would not be here now – so it was a good call from the guys on the pitwall, and yeah, obviously we knew then we only had one set of options left, and tried to give it the best shot in the end. I knew that if I get the lap together, plus whatever we tried in qualifying with the car... I mean you can't really do much, you can't really change the setup but you can play a little bit with the settings you have inside the car: differential, front wing, and yeah, I think we caught up. And I had a good feeling in the

last lap and managed to put everything together in the three sectors – which was good enough for pole. So, I'm very happy, especially after the effort that has gone in, as I touched on, from the guys here but also from the guys in the factory. We've got a couple of new bits here, they seem to be a step forward, which is very good.

I'm told it's more than a couple of new bits. I'm told it's quite a large number of bit...

SV: Well it depends. We've tried a lot, we've been pushing very hard, to be honest. I think it's difficult this year. I think we see everyone is very close to each other and everyone is pushing. If you at McLaren, if you look at Ferrari, if you look at Mercedes. The big teams have more resources, probably, to bring new parts than other teams and they have been bringing more than a couple. A couple is two, so maybe we have also bought more than two – but nevertheless, other teams are up there. Force India was incredibly quick all weekend: yesterday I thought it was just a surprise but even on very low fuel it would have been a very competitive lap time and they confirmed it today. I think in the end they ran out of tyres but in terms of lap times, they weren't far off in Q2. It's tight, it's difficult to make the right step and that's why I'm quite happy to be honest.

I'm not sure what your team-mate's problems were but presumably you had no similar problems.

SV: It's a bit of a shame, because the potential is there. I think Mark would have had a solid qualifying, no doubt and we would have qualified in the same area with a normal qualifying for him. But he had a problem, with the brakes I think this morning and I'm not sure what happened this afternoon – so it's really a shame because you always hope for the team as well to get the best possible result – but nevertheless, yeah, I think the race is long tomorrow, the pace was there on Friday for him as well, so confident he will come back.

But you've had no similar problems.

SV: No, as I said, the only problem he had was the brakes this morning and this afternoon I don't know. But I didn't have any problems fortunately.

Lewis, on pole here in 2009 and three second places over the years. Given the problems you had yesterday, you sound as though you're pretty happy about today's performance.

LH: Yeah. As I was saying, I've really struggled all weekend with setup. During the year I've not really struggled too much to get the right balance but particularly today, and yesterday was a real struggle. But you have those weekends sometimes. You can't always get it perfect. Made some changes going into qualifying that I was just praying would work. And they seemed to have worked, so I was quite happy with the balance that I had. And I was able to... and to be able to get out the lap when you need it, just like Sebastian did. But obviously not as quick as his. But to be able to go out and do those single laps and make sure you maximise the potential of what you have – that really does satisfy me, so I'm happy with where we are.

It's just been so close at this circuit. Even though it's a long lap it's been so close and literally thousandths of a second have made a big difference.

LH: Absolutely. It's very, very surprising. Well, not surprising but it's very interesting to see so many of the teams improving and continuing to bring updates and to see the pack close up. I think it's great to see all the teams so competitive. It makes it even more challenging for us as individuals and also for the teams to up their game. And also for us drivers to make sure we're on top of our game when we're out there.

How much of a different is it going to be with one DRS zone here? I think there were two last year and this year one.

LH: To be honest I have no recollection of what happened last year. But, I don't know, Overtaking here is always difficult. It's always difficult to follow as it is in Monaco. Particularly going through Turn 10 maybe, is it? Going onto the back straight. It's not that easy to follow through out there. But the DRS, I guess, will definitely come into play throughout the race. Hopefully I'll have some chance. Who knows, we'll see what.

We've seen a number of drivers going off at the end of the straight Pastor, and today we saw you go off as well. Is this going to be a major problem during the race, do you think?

PM: I don't think so. I was just not ready for the lap. It was so difficult. As you saw, many drivers were struggling on braking, especially with the front. But I think today was a really good day for the team. We did pretty good, especially because this morning it was very difficult for us – but we understand a bit the way how to make quite well the tyres. And here we are.

Was it a little bit of guesswork, do you think? Lewis touched on guesswork. Normally it's pure theory.

PM: Right now, everything is too tight. Everything is too tight and it's very difficult to make the difference. I saw Q2, and just off one-tenth I was in P7. You can imagine everything counts now. It's very difficult. Even for tomorrow, it's going to be a difficult race. We need to be... we need to stay on the safe side, trying to stay competitive and to stay with the same pace we saw yesterday. We need to stay with the same pace we saw yesterday and then we'll see.

Pastor, would you be happy to finish on the podium tomorrow, or are you hoping for more?

PM: For sure, the points are very important for the team. It will be good to be on the podium but for sure if we can go for more, I will try my best like always, then we will see. Tomorrow the strategy is going to be very important. The team is ready, so looking forward to that.

Lewis and Sebastian: you are the best of those going for pole. Is there any secret to the last lap that you do, and what are your thoughts before going out for that final lap?

LH to SV: What is your secret?

SV: Can't tell you. I'm not sure whether there is a secret. Qualifying, we know, is all about one lap and to be honest, today it was very difficult, very tricky because the wind plays a huge role here, sometimes blowing more than at other times, with gusts and generally it seems to be very slippery. Obviously the grip is lower than last year because the cars have less downforce and it makes it quite tricky, as we touched on. A lot of drivers lock up easily under braking, especially in qualifying when you want to brake as late as you can, but knowing that if you lock up you miss the apex and then you lose time. It's quite difficult but ideally you just try to go through the lap before it happens – at least I had a little bit of time in Q3 – and try to focus on the key points, go through what I have to do and what I have to look out for and then it seems that I did so in the last run. So happy that I got everything together, just on the limit, and got the best out of the car, so I was very happy with the last run.

Sebastian, you have a lot of new parts on your car and the first time you're going to use them in race conditions will be tomorrow, in these very hard conditions. Are you worried about the reliability of your car, considering there are so many new things?

SV: No. You're right, obviously it's the first time because the first time they were on the car was on Friday and since Friday there was no Grand Prix. It makes it difficult but there's always a first time for everything. Obviously we try to build the parts so that they are reliable so as I said, I'm not

worried. I think it will be tough, it will be hot but it's not the worst race of the year for the car in terms of the ambient conditions, so I'm quite confident.

Sebastian and Lewis: do you realise that you have a big opportunity tomorrow to keep a huge advantage to the third guy who we suppose is a contender in the championship, Fernando Alonso. Are you working on a strategy to save points?

LH: No. I anticipate that they will come through very strongly throughout the race, so whilst qualifying for some cars is not important, you look at the Lotuses and you look at... even Mark will be very competitive tomorrow. They have great long run pace and they can look after the tyres better than others, due to low speed downforce. I also know that Ferrari had upgrades this week – at least so Fernando told me – so I anticipate that they are going to be very competitive. Again, as I said, I'm very surprised for us because we didn't have any upgrades this weekend and so to be where we are is a big bonus for us.

From what you have learned about the tyres here, can it be another race like Montreal where people in the race come out of nowhere with different strategies or different tyre management?

SV: I think Montreal was different: the tyre choice was different in Montreal. We had the supersoft and soft and I think we already saw on Friday in Montreal that the tyres last pretty well. On Sunday then, some people were able to prove that doing a one stop and obviously when it's close between one and two stops then there can be a difference and people come out of nowhere. Lewis did the right thing, two weeks ago, by going with two stops. We did the wrong thing but I think it should be different here. The race is not so many laps and the tyres are a little bit different. It's going to be hot again but I think it's a different race, different track, different conditions.

I would like to ask all three drivers: given the fact that this is a street circuit, next year we have New Jersey, we now have an effort in Greece to have a similar race in Athens. What do you think is the perfect mixture between street circuits and proper (permanent) circuits and of course what's your opinion about coming to race in Formula One in Greece?

LH: I don't know how many street circuits compared to other circuits we should have, but I love street circuits. They always provide entertaining races, perhaps not always the tracks that enable you to overtake as often as other places like Spa but still, as a driver, they are the most fun because on street circuits you have less room for error. I've only ever been to Greece once. I went years and year and years ago with Nico Rosberg. We went on holiday there, when I was about 13 and I've been dying to go back ever since. I was going to go earlier on this year but the weather wasn't as good as I had hoped. I imagine at some stage in the future, once the world and Greece is past the stage they're in now, I think we would welcome a race – at least I would.

SV: As Lewis touched on, I think street circuits are always good fun. It's a different challenge because you haven't got room for error, but one thing you can't have on a street circuit is fast corners, really, because there's no run-off and no space. I think the street circuits that we have are pretty quick but it's maybe the exception. If you would build a new track again or look for a new layout you probably wouldn't go that close to the limit, knowing what could happen, so therefore we need to make sure it's not going to be all street circuits in the future but surely, it's very good fun, a lot of bumps and that makes it very technical, very difficult, challenging for us and if we could have a race in Athens it would be great. It's a beautiful country, I was there last year so yeah, obviously there's a lot going on right now and it's not looking too good but being German, we are doing our best to help – not yesterday, that's sport! As I say, it would be great and a great opportunity for Formula One as well, but I don't know if there are any plans so we'll have to wait.

PM: I agree with Lewis and Seb. I think it's not only fun for us as drivers, I think it's fun for the fans and I think we need both conditions just to try to put Formula One in the top position. Spain, here, is a great one, especially because of the city and a lot of facilities but the future is like that. We follow the future and for sure we enjoy these kind of tracks.

Pastor, I would like to know if there is extra power for you to have all these people coming from Venezuela, more than 100 people? Do you feel it's nearly like a home Grand Prix?

PM: It's not a proper home race but here in Spain we have a big community of Venezuelans and as well, it's quite easy (to get here) from Venezuela, we have many flights. It's a really good feeling to see them, especially in the stands, full of flags. It's good. I hope to give them back some good news tomorrow, so we will see.

We had 0.291 from Grosjean first to Massa in Q2. Does this tiny difference make you drive accurately; does it change your approach with the team's set-up? What does it change in your regular work?

SV: I think it makes it extremely difficult. I know exactly what happened to Fernando because I had the same in China. There were three tenths: Mark was first in Q2 and I was eleventh. It's not nice, because you probably always know that if you're looking for five hundredths which would be enough, a little bit here and there, but that's the risk you have to take to set the time in the first place, but it's tight and there's very little room for error, especially like here where it's very slippery, very easy to lose a little bit, lock up the wheel towards the apex, don't get it perfectly right, maybe the exit is not 100 percent either, so it's tricky but you have to attack otherwise you're not there in the first place.

LH: No, it doesn't really change the approach in qualifying, you're always attacking and if anything it just means you need to be more precise.

PM: I think now, with these gaps, you just need to put everything together just to be there. It's difficult for everybody, especially for the tyres, to get the maximum out of the tyres is not easy and when you get it, you are here.

FI European Grand Prix – Race report

What was that? Did our eyes deceive us? Were we really treated to 57 laps of exciting action at the Valencia street circuit? Someone pass the smelling salts – I don't think I'm feeling well.

Since the race's debut in 2008 it has been accepted as fact that the Valencia track is hardly conducive to good racing. Without DRS we were lucky to see any passing, and even the 2011 race was little more than a procession with the occasional overtaking manoeuvre.

But this year, with the circuit's future under threat from the torpedoing local economy, Valencia gave Formula One fans around the world a thrilling race. If this is to have been the venue's curtain call, it's one heck of a last hurrah.

Which isn't to say that the early stages of Sunday's race didn't look scarily like 2011 all over again. Sebastian Vettel – already on pole by a dominant margin – got a good start, powered off into the lead, and opened up a 2.3s lead on Lewis Hamilton in P2 by the second lap.

Not only was Hamilton unable to keep pace with Vettel, but he was slowing down Romain Grosjean in P3 – the frontrunner in the best position to challenge the Red Bull driver for the win. By the time Grosjean was able to pass the McLaren on lap 10, Vettel had built up enough of a lead that he was nearly one pit stop ahead of the Lotus on track. Grosjean was pushing hard, but it still looked as though the race would be a foregone conclusion.

Until Jean-Eric Vergne collided with the Caterham of Heikki Kovalainen, bringing out the Safety Car that would later prove to have been instrumental to the outcome of the race. When the Safety Car was deployed on lap 28, Vettel had a twenty second lead and was running away with the race. But with the traffic bunched up, Grosjean was in the perfect position to try and make a move on Vettel at the restart.

Grosjean was too busy jostling for position with Alonso to get ahead of Vettel at the restart, but one lap later the race leader pulled over to the side of the track, out of the race as the result of what later transpired to be alternator failure. The German driver blamed what he called the unnecessary Safety Car for his retirement, and the loss of 25 important championship points.

Crucially, Vettel's retirement did what the Safety Car could not – it opened up the race once again, with Grosjean, Alonso, Hamilton, and Raikkonen all in with a chance of victory. The Ferrari had made it past the Lotus and taken the lead, and the McLaren needed only to pass the Toro Rosso of Daniel Ricciardo to be in the fight.

Grosjean kept pace with Alonso, and by lap 40 was looking to be within a few laps of a DRS-enabled pass. But on lap 41 the Frenchman pulled over to the side of the track, his Renault engine having suffered an identical alternator failure to that experienced by Vettel only a few laps previously.

The battle was now on in earnest – just over ten laps remaining, tyres in a host of variable conditions, and the leading pack of three now under threat from Michael Schumacher, who pitted for fresh rubber as Grosjean retired and proceeded to spend the next few laps devouring the traffic ahead on older rubber. Webber mimicked the move, and the German and the Australian began to pick their way up through the pack.

The next ten laps saw the battle at the front closing and expanding like an accordion as Alonso, Hamilton, and Raikkonen struggled to maximise their tyres while holding position. Worst off was Hamilton, who was sliding backwards in his MP4-27 by the time Raikkonen slipped past him on lap 55.

With two laps remaining, the Briton was still on the podium but vulnerable to the approaching Williams of Pastor Maldonado. And on the penultimate lap of the race, Maldonado attempted to pass Hamilton, pushed the McLaren into the wall, and knocked himself out of contention for a podium.

Schumacher and his fresh tyres were in the perfect position to capitalise on what was effectively a double-retirement, and the German legend crossed the line in P3, claiming the first podium finish of his comeback. Ahead, Alonso was able to keep Raikkonen in his mirrors; the Ferrari driver became the first double-winner of the 2012 Formula One season.

While Formula One's record-breaking run of a different winner at every race has now come to a halt, the fact that the changeable streak lasted for one-third of the season only serves to highlight just how competitive this year's machines truly are. The Pirelli rubber is certainly a major factor in the close racing we've seen this season, but as important is the lack of a single magic bullet in any one of the cars.

After the race, Vergne was issued with a ten-place grid penalty at the British Grand Prix for his part in the collision with Kovalainen. Kobayashi was handed a five-place grid penalty in Silverstone for an incident with Felipe Massa on lap 35 that led to the Sauber driver's retirement. Maldonado was issued with a twenty-second time penalty for the collision with Hamilton.

European Grand Prix results (unofficial)

1. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
2. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) + 6.42ls
3. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) + 12.639s
4. Mark Webber (Red Bull) + 13.628s
5. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) + 19.993s
6. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) + 21.176s
7. Paul di Resta (Force India) + 22.866s
8. Jenson Button (McLaren) + 24.653s
9. Sergio Perez (Sauber) + 27.777s
10. Bruno Senna (Williams) + 35.961s
11. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) + 37.041s
12. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) + 34.653s*
13. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) + 1m15.871s
14. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) + 1m34.654s
15. Charles Pic (Marussia) + 1m36.551s
16. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) + 1 lap
17. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) + 1 lap
18. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) + 1 lap
19. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) + 2 laps

Romain Grosjean (Lotus) RET
Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) RET
Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) RET
Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) RET
Timo Glock (Marussia) DNS

* Maldonado was given a 20s penalty by the stewards for his part in the Hamilton collision, moving the Williams driver from P10 to P12 post-race.

F1 European Grand Prix – Sunday press conference

The European Grand Prix was full of firsts: the first double race winner of the 2012 season, Michael Schumacher's first post-comeback podium, and the first exciting race the Valencia Street Circuit has ever seen.

Present were Fernando Alonso (Ferrari), Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus), and Michael Schumacher (Mercedes).

Three former Ferrari world champions on the podium but Fernando this is a pretty good weekend to be a Spanish sportsman called Alonso. A fabulous victory for yourself.

Fernando ALONSO: Yeah. It's difficult to express in words what is the feeling now. Winning a home grand prix is something unique – a very special feeling. I had the opportunity to do this in Barcelona in 2006 with Renault and I still remember that day perfectly. And now I did the same here in Valencia, with this special team, Ferrari, with all the grandstand full of red colour and Spanish flags. Here now, with the Euro football championship also, there is a lot of Spanish atmosphere inside all of us. Feeling very proud to be a Spanish sportsman at the moment and winning in Spain this race is probably the best victory I ever felt in terms of emotions. Nothing maybe compares to this one.

You joined in the celebrations a little early Fernando. Why did you stop your car, just to take part in the party?

FA: No, no. We had a problem with the car and we stopped it. It was the right place maybe because we had two grandstands there. It took a little bit of time for the medical car to arrive and we had eight or 10 minutes of all the people saying things about me, saying congratulations. They want me to jump. You know, fun and games and we enjoy a little bit those minutes.

Kimi, it's a third podium position of the season for you. Was a victory possible for you today or were the tyres just not there at the end?

Kimi RAIKKONEN: I think everybody had quite old tyres at that point. I just didn't have enough tyres. I had enough tyres to get past Hamilton on I think it was the second-last or third-last lap. We didn't really have the speed to challenge for the win. I think on the start already I got a good start but got blocked by Maldonado in the first right-hander and lost quite a few places because of that. I was a bit behind already at that point. We made a good recovery from that position. I had quite a hard fight with people and overtaking and then second place. It's OK of course, but not what we wanted.

Michael, they say you can't overtake on this track but you saw your fair share today. Welcome back to the podium. At what stage did you think this podium was a possibility?

Michael SCHUMACHER: I didn't actually think about a podium at all at the end of the race. It was crossing the line that I asked my guys 'where did we finish?' I saw Webber's pit board and close to the end it showed him eighth and seventh and I knew I was one place ahead of that one. And then boys told me 'that's third, that's podium'. I can't believe that! It's something I didn't really expect. You sort of lose count, because I was pretty busy in the last stages of the race, plus Maldonado and Hamilton had their issue. Probably normally one minus one would give us the three but I lose count at that stage.

It's moments like these that brought you back to the sport I'm sure.

MS: Yeah, it's those moments that definitely you enjoy deeply. It's just a wonderful feeling to back after such a long time. We were a couple of times close to it. It happened in a pretty spectacular way on a track where it is difficult to pass but due to various strategies and differences on track it was pretty exciting and that's obviously the best way, if you manage the way I did today to jump the podium unexpectedly makes you extra happy.

Finally, back to you Fernando. You described this as your best victory. After the disappointment of qualifying to the euphoria or today. How do you explain that, or is it just Formula One in 2012?

FA: That's Formula One. That's the best thing we can say. It's unpredictable. Good results. Still a sport. Sport is about that. Sport is about the ups and downs. Yesterday, we had a tough moment. We were said not being in Q3. But you can never give up because anything can happen in sport in general and maybe more in Formula One. There are many factors inside, there are the cars, brakes, engines – anything can have a failure in the race. There are a lot of things we need to take care: the strategies, the start, the overtaking, manoeuvres. When you put all of these in one thing you have a Formula One grand prix. Today, we had an amazing race, amazing start, some good fights, I think I remember six or seven overtakings where it was very close, we touched each other. I touched Grosjean in the restart. All of those little moments can go on the wrong side and you finish the race in the wall, or you can be the winner at the end. And today, we had all the good factors with us and the luck and we have to enjoy this.

Fernando, well done. Tell us about the pleasure of winning here at home in Spain.

FA: I don't know what to say really. It's an amazing feeling. As I said in the other press conference I still can remember Barcelona in 2006, now, so years after the win. So probably I will have better and better memories of today with time. Right now, it's just too many things on my feelings and too many thanks to give to all the team, all the fans, all the support that I felt all weekend. Especially yesterday after the qualifying, you never think that you can do a good result or that you can fight for the podium or something like that. When you find yourself third in the race after the safety car, I said: 'hopefully there is the chequered flag now and I enjoy this podium celebration.' Two laps later I overtake Grosjean on the restart and you think again 'hopefully the race finishes now'. Then Vettel stopped and it was a very long race until the end and, yeah, I enjoyed so much this moment. But as I said, difficult to put in words what I'm feeling.

Were you worried that the tyres were going to drop off at the end just as they did in Canada?

FA: No, they did. I was not worried. They did. They did, about eight laps from the end. I said to the team 'the tyres are finished, we need to do something'. They said: 'wait one more sector because they are not quicker than you at this moment'. The next sector they were the same as me. So they said: 'wait one more lap to see how much quicker they are' and the next lap they were the same time as us. Wait another lap and wait another and then it was three laps from the end and they were in the same lap times and we went until the end. But the tyres were as finished as in Canada but it was for everybody this time.

You mentioned a problem with the car at the end. Was that something that was also affecting the closing laps?

FA: No, I don't think so. The car felt OK and then on the in-lap I had an emergency call to stop the car. So it was feeling OK.

So do you not know what was wrong with the car?

FA: No, I had too many things to enjoy in that moment to ask what happened in the car.

Kimi, quite a busy race for you too, what with battles with Maldonado and Hamilton.

KR: Yeah, I got a pretty good start but then in the first right-hander, the little kink, I got blocked by Maldonado so I had to back off. I lost quite a few places there, so at that point onwards it was a case of trying to catch up and try to get past people. I managed to pass some, but it was difficult to pass today. I got sight of Maldonado a few times but he pushed me wide. I tried and tried and then in the end I managed to get past some people and after the safety car I managed to get past people also. On the restart, I lost a place to Hamilton. I just got too much wheelspin out of the corner. It was quite a busy race actually. Then, when I was in the third place, a few cars retired and I thought I would try to save the tyres a bit and try to get Hamilton at some point. I saw him sliding a bit. So I think it was the second-last lap or something but I got him in the end. OK the result second after all things we went through in the race but of course you're never happy until you win. And for the team, bad luck. It would have been much nicer to have both cars on the podium.

And your tyres. Were they shot at the end?

KR: Yeah, the rear tyres were pretty bad. Especially in the middle of the circuit. There were three or four corners that were really bad. The rest was not so bad. I think everybody had similar issues.

Michael those last few laps – you took on new tyres 16 laps from the end – must have been amazing, especially with yellow flags and all sorts of things going on. What was it like? Tell us.

MS: Yeah. Certainly I wasn't aware I was going in the direction of a podium. Even crossing the line I wasn't aware at that stage. But, being pretty heavily involved for most of the race in some kind of battling and then having Webber all the time on my tail and needing to fight forward but needing to pay attention to the back, that was very exciting. But that's what I'm here for: to be excited and those guys got me excited, no doubt. And hearing finally the message P3 – yeah, that's a sweet finish to an unexpected end.

Particularly because you and Nico were outside the points. He finished about sixth, picking up about four places in the last few laps. Extraordinary race for you guys.

MS: Yeah, we obviously had a late decision converting from a one-stop to a two-stop strategy, which meant we had good tyres towards the end of the race, when other people either did a one or an early two-stop strategy and therefore struggled by the end because they had no tyres left.

And all those points must be very welcome.

MS: Yeah, I guess it has changed my count a little bit, from the two points I had so far. They're more than welcome.

Fernando, an amazing victory but yesterday you sort of predicted what could happen today, when asked if you were sad or angry, you said 'well, the result is no good, there are two people who are challenging me for the leadership. Vettel and Hamilton are in front but we will have to wait until tomorrow.' You never know what can happen, and that happened.

FA: Yeah, it was another example of Fridays and Saturdays in Formula One, which are OK, are fun, are good to make some grid order in terms of performance of the car and it's good to check where you are exactly, but at the end of the day, Friday practice is one thing, when we all normally test different parts of the car, and then Saturday is OK, it's much better and easier to start on the first rows of the grid, for sure, to make a clean race, but until the chequered flag, anything can happen and until today at two o'clock we had quite a bad weekend and now we have had a very good weekend. It's something that we need to remember, always, that until the last lap in the race, we need to be positive and to trust in ourselves.

Fernando, the last time that we saw you cry was in Abu Dhabi 2010. Now you have been crying again. Can you explain the atmosphere and the team's hard work over the past month?

FA: No, it was more for my own feelings and the people in the grandstands. I know it's not the best time in Spain at the moment, with the crisis and all the problems that people have. To come to a Grand Prix you have to make something extra to come here, so there are families who have made long trips to come here, they sleep in the car or in a caravan or whatever, they try to enjoy the race and yesterday... it's not that you feel sad, we didn't deliver what they were probably expecting, so today I think we paid back a little bit – only a little bit – the support that they gave us and all the problems that they are facing, all the worries that the Spanish people are facing at this time, together with the football team – yesterday we saw all the flags in the windows and on the street etc so there is some kind of pride in being Spanish right now with the sport: with Nadal, with the Spanish football team etc and I felt that I needed to do something and today is a very emotional day.

Fernando, now you obviously believe in this title because of two impressive victories and some luck this year which you haven't had in other years. Do you believe in this title?

FA: I think we always need to be cautious and we always need to be honest with ourselves first and with our supporters, saying that we will fight, will work day and night to be competitive and to fight for the title which is the ultimate goal for Ferrari. Any championship in which we participate, the championship should be the target, regarding the history and the level of the team. But yesterday we were P11 and P13 so we need to work. It's true that we believe and we will never give up, we will have confidence in ourselves and we will arrive with optimism at every Grand Prix we go to, but at the same time, apart from winning today or finishing sixth today, we know that we are not in the position that we want to be and there are a few cars quicker than us and we cannot be blind to that. We need to work.

Michael, you were back on the podium, the first since you came back with Mercedes. Is the feeling what you imagined or is it something different now?

MS: I don't know what I mentioned or didn't mention but the point is that it is a beautiful feeling, not only being on the podium but the way it has happened. It was not at all expected. All weekend, I predicted this to be a difficult one for us and it started to be difficult yesterday in qualifying, mainly because of my own mistakes and to recover from where we are, getting to third position is just awesome. The team and myself have been criticised here and there, particularly lately, and this is the best way to answer criticism, to go back and deliver as we did today, and therefore I'm proud, thankful and very excited.

Michael, you said you will think about your future during the summer. Summer is beginning and you begin the summer with a podium. Does it change something for next year?

MS: I don't think I ever said any kind of time, neither did I say summer and if you may apologise, I have no further news on that matter, so give me the time that I need and we will see.

Michael, what did you feel when you were jumping on the podium and you saw two guys who were at Ferrari after you and you

saw Stella (Andrea Stella, Alonso's race engineer who represented Ferrari on the podium) who was one of the...

MS: Yeah, well that's what we were joking about. Andrea is Fernando's engineer and used to be our engineer in the past and in a way it's the order. The current driver he works for is first, the second last was Kimi and I was the third last. It's a funny coincidence and it's great to see him up there. He's been doing a great job. I still remember those days and I'm happy for Fernando and the team to have achieved what they did today here and particularly the words that Fernando just said, I think everybody can feel with him and I'm just happy for them.

The second question was about the difference between now and in the past. You criticised the tyres a little bit on Saturday, saying 'we can't exploit our potential.' Do you feel that your skill is penalised?

MS: Forgive me if we only think about the positive aspects of what happened today.

Fernando it was a complicated race, also for you coming from P11 to P1. When you look back at it, was there one key moment, was there one point where you can say 'if I hadn't done that, I would not have won this Grand Prix'?

FA: I think there are four or five moments in that race which changed our result. Probably the start and the first lap were very aggressive, nearly touched in the first corner, turn four I think I overtook two cars braking on the outside. That, for sure, maybe changed because we had Button... we were fighting in turn one, and then Button was like P14 or something like that. If you finish in his position, maybe the race is more difficult so we were lucky at that moment. We were lucky in some of the overtaking, I think, with Maldonado and with Webber and Michael as well, at the moment we went out of the pits. For sure, Grosjean overtaking me was very risky at the restart. We touched in the first two corners. After we touched each other I felt that the car was not very good. When you have a little contact with someone, for whatever reason you feel that the car is wrong for the next two corners, because you are so worried that something happened and that maybe you convince yourself that something has happened. But then one lap later the times were OK and the car was good. Those were the key moments of the race, plus the last stint, as I said, the tyres were finished so we had to control the tyre wear plus the pressure from Grosjean, the pressure from Hamilton, with Kimi at the end - not a single lap to relax, in a way.

Alonso, did the team tell you that Hamilton had an incident with Maldonado?

FA: They told me yellow flags in turn 12. There was a car on the outside and then I saw it was a McLaren.

Kimi, is it realistic to believe that if you had overtaken Hamilton before that you could attack Alonso?

KR: I would have overtaken if I could. I was not waiting for the last or second last lap. I just didn't have the speed. I just had to wait until he ran out of his tyres. Then I got the chance. I tried to get closer and closer but I was not fast enough earlier on, otherwise I would definitely have tried to overtake. But basically I let him past at the restart. After the bridge, I made a mistake and he got past me. It was my own mistake.

Fernando, given the roller-coaster of emotions, the fact that you've re-taken the World Championship lead, the tyres having gone off, the Spanish situation - how do you rate this victory in your 29 races that you've won to date?

FA: I think from the emotional side this is the best one. The emotions that I felt on the in lap, or during the podium ceremony or right now, I think doesn't compare to anything before. I confirm that this is the best feeling of victory by far, because the whole situation in Spain, as I said, and the grandstands, the weekend in general, how they support us. In terms of the race itself, or driving, probably they were a little better. We pushed, but as we said, these days races are decided by little factors and today we had retirements from Grosjean then from Vettel. We had the tyres, the safety car when we took the opportunity to stop as probably everybody did but we did a stop. I think there are maybe races like this year in Malaysia that I feel more proud of the driving itself.

Kimi and Michael, about the championship, if you had to bet some money, would you put that money on Fernando or is there still some room for Vettel and Hamilton?

KR: I don't even know what the points are so it's a bit difficult to say. We've seen how quickly things can change this year. You only need one bad race and the guy wins so I wouldn't put money, probably use it for something else.

MS: Things change so quickly - maybe I put money on myself.
