

# The Chequered Flag



A Formula One blog by **Stephen English**  
www.stephenenglish.ie

Formula 1 returns to its traditional European heartland this weekend with the Spanish Grand Prix. Barcelona has been a second home for much of the grid for the last twenty years and the teams all know the track intimately having pounded around the Circuit de Catalunya lap after lap, year after year. The simulators and post rigs do most of the running nowadays but the track knowledge can still allow for some surprises. Last year we saw Williams and Pastor Maldonado win. The Venezuelan's performance was derided by many as being a lucky win but once Lewis Hamilton was banished to the back of the grid for running out of fuel in qualifying Maldonado was the fastest man on the track. He eked every ounce of performance from his car and withstood tremendous pressure from Fernando Alonso to hold off the Spaniard and claim the first win of his career and Williams' first win since 2004. Maldonado's showing last year perfectly illustrated contemporary Formula 1. If you get your car setup perfectly the differences between the teams is quite small and if a driver and team get the absolute maximum from their package they can shock the rest of the grid. Paul di Resta showed this last time out in Bahrain. The Force India driver drove magnificently and on most other days he would have been rewarded with a podium.

## The Circuit de Catalunya

Originally built to host the Olympic cycling road race of the '92 games the Circuit de Catalunya has established itself as one of the most popular race tracks in series as diverse as Formula 1, MotoGP and DTM. The track has been one of the most popular amongst teams for testing because it has a bit of everything. Fast corners, slow corners and one of the most severe tests of a car's aerodynamics in the likes of never ending turn three. The lap begins with the one kilometre long front straight, which also incorporates the longest run from the starting grid towards turn one for the season. With a straight of this size DRS plays a key role in races with lots of overtaking in the previous two seasons and with a second zone also set to be utilised this weekend we should see plenty of overtaking. Sergio Perez has had a difficult start to his McLaren career but the Mexican is looking forward to building on his aggressive Bahrain, where he finished sixth and hot on Lewis Hamilton's heels: "The Circuit de Catalunya is a place all grand prix drivers know well because we do a lot of miles there in the winter," commented Perez. "It'll be a good place to test the car as it's a very demanding circuit aerodynamically. We have a lot of historic data from our testing there, and we'll get a good read on our

# Formula 1 Round 5 Spanish Grand Prix-view

## Barcelona sees first strikes of 2013 development war

performance when we start testing next Friday. "It's a demanding circuit aerodynamically, too, so it should be a very useful weekend for us in terms of understanding the MP4-28 and the direction forwards that we choose to take. Lotus driver Kimi Raikkonen has started the season in good form but the team need to start finding more performance from the car if the Finn is to have a chance of maintaining his challenge for the championship. Heading to Spain Raikkonen is ten points behind Sebastian Vettel and the Finn, who finished third at last year's race, knows that this weekend will be a challenge for him: "It's a circuit where you have to get everything exactly right to be at the top," said the former champion. "All the teams have tested many times at this circuit, so to get an advantage there is not very easy. The set-up is crucial as the track changes with the wind and temperature so there's plenty of work for the engineers too."

Barcelona is also a good test of engines as outlined by Remi Taffin of Renault Sport: "Barcelona has a very good 'average' of characteristics of other circuits on the calendar," said the Frenchman. "There are a variety of low and medium speed corners that push the lower rev ranges of the engine, but there is also the 1km pit straight where the cars reach over 300kph. The undulating nature of the track also puts the engine internals under pressure so every element of the engine gets a full workout here."

**Ferrari and Red Bull look to duke it out** Ferrari and Red Bull are clearly the best all round packages in Formula 1 at the moment. Even so neither team can rest on their laurels otherwise the likes of Lotus will pounce on any mistake and claim the spoils. However Sebastian Vettel and Fernando Alonso are clearly the title favourites at the moment with each driver having asserted their status as their team's number one again this year. They did this in different ways. Alonso has asserted his position once again by virtue of being a faster racer than his teammate Massa. Vettel asserted his dominance with his disregard of radio instructions at Sepang. Their means were different but the result was the same. Two of the very best drivers in Formula 1 history have consolidated their position within their teams even though at Ferrari Massa has been the stronger qualifier and Mark Webber still doggedly refuses to acquiesce to Vettel. The German has obviously seen his reputation



Fernando Alonso heads home to the Spanish Grand Prix looking to add to his Bahrain victory take a battering in the last month. However his championship position is looking very healthy and that is all that matters to the triple world champion. This weekend should give us a good indication of what to expect from Webber going forward. Will he dig deep and have a strong weekend at a track that he has won at, and had also started from pole position, in the past? Or will we see that he is mentally beaten and simply waiting for the season to end and for him to move on to a new challenge? It's very difficult to imagine anyone as competitive as Webber simply fading to the background and allowing Vettel to win races and another title. He is one of the most combative drivers I can remember and he will surely fight it out for the remainder of the season. China and Bahrain were billed as a race where we would see the intra-team dynamics of Red Bull play out publicly once again. The fight hasn't materialised yet but it will surely do so over the coming months.

At Ferrari we have seen a rejuvenated Massa drive very well at times. His qualifying performances have been particularly impressive but he has faded in races. Felipe admitted after China that he had struggled with the prime tyres in Shanghai and it has been a familiar trend at other races with the Brazilian simply unable to match Alonso's consistency over the course of a race distance. Massa however is clearly back to being close to the driver he was in 2008 and with time he should find a way of maximising his car over a full race. He is the ideal number two for Alonso. In qualifying he is fast enough to keep the Spaniard on his toes but rarely costs him points in races. If Massa can start to finish on the rostrum, and maybe win a race, he will play a key role in the title battle.

**Raikkonen and Lotus to confirm status?** The surprise of Raikkonen's Melbourne success has now faded and Lotus need to build on their solid start to the season with strong Spanish performance. Raikkonen has gone well in Barcelona in the past, twice a winner and a podium finisher 12 months ago, but it is crucial for his championship challenge that he finishes ahead of the likes of Sebastian Vettel this weekend. The gap currently stands at ten points but that can easily swing to a much bigger margin if Raikkonen has a bad weekend. He needs to be in position to be a genuine championship challenger when F1 heads to Canada in two races time. If he is within shout of Vettel and Alonso at the Montreal race then he can genuinely be a contender. If he loses ground in the mean time it is likely that he will simply repeat his 2012 form. Last year the Finn drove terrifically but even though he was in contention mathematically for the title it never really seemed like he could be a contender. Having to wait until Abu Dhabi for

his Shanghai victory the key win obviously hit his challenge considerably but a string of podiums wasn't enough. To win the title you need to be winning races and, depending on the weather, Barcelona could be tailor made for the Lotus. If it is dry the tyre degradation should make three stops the norm and as a result if Kimi can eek out the tyre life, as he has done already this season, and make one stop less he could be in a position to win. If it is wet all bets are off as far as the race winner is concerned and it will simply be a case of whoever gets the most from their car. Speaking earlier this week Raikkonen outlined the key for a strong weekend: "In Barcelona it will be important to qualify well as it will be much harder to overtake than in Bahrain," said the Finn. "As a team, this is an area where we can still improve a little bit, but we have some ideas of how to do that and hopefully we'll be able to make the front row." When asked about having an advantage with regard to tyre wear Raikkonen deflected the question by asserting that he simply drives in a manner to get to the flag as quickly as possible: "Tyre management has always been part of the qualifying and race strategy. I don't know about others, I just know that I always push as much as I can to obtain the best result possible. Of course, if you drive a certain way or adapt yourself you can get more out of the tyres than if you don't, but that's just part of being a racing driver; you always have to adapt to extract maximum performance."

**Development key at McLaren and Mercedes** McLaren and Mercedes are facing very similar predicaments in the coming races. Although both teams are coming from vastly different perspectives the development of their cars will be one of the most watched aspects of the coming races. McLaren have underwhelmed tremendously in the opening four races whereas Mercedes have exceeded expectations with strong qualifying efforts and podiums. However with Mercedes struggling with rear tyre life if they are going to be able to continue to fight at the front they need to bring developments on stream as soon as possible. Developing a car during the season has not traditionally been one of the team's strengths. They have consistently underperformed throughout their various guises to develop a car as the year progresses and ending that cycle is crucial if they are to win races in 2013. Lewis Hamilton and Nico Rosberg have had strong showings so far this year but they now need to do more than surprise. The target for 2013 at the start of the season was for them to be a regular points scorer and occasional podium finisher. However goals in Formula 1 are always dynamic. When you exceed expectations early in the year there is a belief that the team must change their goals. In 2008 BMW

time ago for the team and having struggled through the opening four races there had been hope that the Barcelona upgrade would see them much more competitive. From Button's comments it's clear that finding the required performance is still some way off. The car has been a handful throughout the opening four races of the season and with the Spanish Grand Prix marking the quarter pole of the 2013 season it is clear that they are running out of time to find the required performance before development focus inevitably shifts towards the new 2014 regulations. **New mindset is clearly helping di Resta** Paul di Resta's strong performance in Bahrain backed up his assertion after the Chinese Grand Prix that he was racing at a high level and that the team would be in position to challenge for points in the coming races. The Scot endured a miserable second half to 2012 where he was consistently outpaced by his then teammate, Nico Hulkenberg. Over the winter however di Resta has clearly "reset" his approach to Formula 1 and is now driving to his ability rather than worrying about issues that he can't control. In Bahrain this allowed di Resta to fight for a podium finish before eventually equalling his career best finish in fourth place. To have made such strides it is clear that the car is also working well and the team have clearly spent a lot of time refining last year's car to allow the VJM06 to be a decent proposition in a wide variety of circumstances. Whereas in the past the team developed cars that seemed to work better at individual circuits we have seen them perform well at the Australian, Chinese and Bahrain races so far this season. With a raft of upgrades coming on-stream for every team on the grid this weekend it is clear that Force India will have to do a great job to maintain their position of fifth in the Constructors' Championship and di Resta has a realistic approach to the coming weekend: "The car is performing well, especially in the heat, and we were also strong in the cooler conditions of China - so that's a good sign," said the Scot. "The key is making sure you find the right operating window whatever the conditions because that's what makes the difference. "We need to keep doing what we're doing, but at the same time we know the return to Europe always sees every team bring more upgrades. Hopefully we can stay fighting with the big teams and keep picking up the points." On the other side of the Force India garage Adrian Sutil has had a difficult stretch of races with the German a helpless victim in both China and Bahrain. As a result just making it to the finish is his target this weekend: "It is important, after three difficult races without points, to finish the race without any incidents," said Sutil. "If I do that, I should have the pace to be among the front-runners. I have to do my job, avoid mistakes and hopefully my luck will change."

**Williams pin hopes on new exhausts** They say that a week is a long time in sport so the twelve months since last year's Spanish suc-



After a solid start to 2013 it is crucial that Mercedes can build on the early season podiums

cess has given Williams a lot of time to take stock of their situation. Last year the team exceeded expectations with Maldonado's victory and a host of Q3 efforts. It was always likely to be difficult to build on that success and continue their progress back towards the front of the grid but so far 2013 has been exceptionally disappointing for the team. Maldonado and Valtteri Bottas have not troubled the scorers so far in the opening four races and with both drivers clearly unhappy with the balance of the car this race is pivotal for Williams. The team has focused on the exhaust area as their primary weakness and with both drivers clearly lacking confidence in the cars handling it is clear that any improvement is badly needed. The team's chief race engineer, Xevi Pujolar, highlighted that while the team was aware of the issue it was also difficult to make changes from the opening races: "We are working with a package for Spain and we expect it to be better - but we cannot say how much," he said. "All the races [at the start of the season] were very close together, with every track changing and what was happening with the tyre changing - so while we could see the problem, from one place to another it was not exactly the same. So we have been catching up and trying to get the best for Barcelona. Once we are in Europe, then probably everything will be a bit easier."

As ever data is key in Formula 1 and getting more of it at a track that the team knows well should help them better understand the problem and make the necessary improvements. Unfortunately for Williams the development race means that you are constantly shooting into moving goalposts. It is not enough to match the development pace of your rivals; you need to exceed them. For Maldonado it will obviously be a special weekend but rather than remember 2012 he is looking forward to upcoming developments: "It will be very special to return to Barcelona after my win there last season," said Maldonado. "We are now entering a very important part of the season because the next couple of races are quite close to the factory, so there will be more opportunities for us to react to our performance on track and make changes to the car."

**Familial track for 2013 rookies** The five strong rookie contingent have all raced at Barcelona in various categories and tested here over the winter. As a result they should be able to hit the ground running this weekend as opposed to having to spend the opening practice session figuring out the intricacies of various tracks. Jules Bianchi has been very impressive in these opening races and the Frenchman will now look to build on a promising start to his Formula 1 career in the coming races: "Although my first four races have been quite positive - and a nice adventure for me personally - as a driver in my debut season it is good to be heading into the start of the European

season," said Bianchi. "The tracks are very familiar to me from previous formulae and that just provides a further confidence with interpreting the information we collect and how we roll that back into performance. The team has spent a lot of time analysing our progress so it will be good to verify our findings with the package so far and of course to explore our new developments for Spain. I'm looking forward to getting busy in the car again." Bianchi has started his career by dominating his teammate, Max Chilton, and his stock has risen quite highly and the Ferrari Academy driver's success looks likely to play a key role in the fortunes of his team going forward. With new engine regulations coming into force next year it is crucial for Marussia to nail down a supplier and Bianchi's speed and consistency will surely mean that Ferrari would be more likely to become the team's supplier next year. That's obviously getting too far ahead of ourselves and for Bianchi is focused on beating his teammate and trying to knock off one of the established teams. Chilton on the other hand will once again be looking to learn as much as possible this weekend. He is, comparatively, much less experienced than his teammate. As a result it is important not to too judge the Englishman until we get into the second half of the season. Speaking ahead of this weekend the GP2 race winner is clearly focused on learning as much as possible once again this weekend and developing the car: "It will be great to get back down to business in Spain," said Chilton. "There will be a lot to focus our attentions on. We've learned a lot in the first four races and quite a lot since, with the technical team having been hard at it in the break. What we bring to the Circuit de Catalunya is the product of four races of evaluation coupled with the next step in our ongoing development path, so it will be interesting to see how we can progress from Bahrain."

Sauber's Esteban Gutierrez has had a tumultuous start to the season. He has looked impressive on occasions...and impetuous on others! The Mexican has speed but he needs to temper his aggression and instead focus on being mistake free this weekend. "The track is quite demanding, especially the last sector," commented the Mexican. "Tyre management will be crucial here, and, especially during a qualifying lap, you need to nurse your tyres in the first two sectors in order to get a clean third sector. You must make sure the tyres still have good grip when you approach the final corners of the lap, including the chicane. We have to wait and see if the updates will help us to catch up with the guys further up the field."

With Williams struggling to get the most from their car it has been a difficult start to his career for Bottas but the Finn has impressed with his calm approach to racing and his ability to match Maldonado. "I know the track really well as I've raced there in Formula Renault and Formula 3 and I've done a lot of F1 testing here"

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Mark Webber will be looking to get his season back on track this weekend after a difficult start to the campaign