

F1: And yet, McLaren are strangely silent

Another announcement from Vijay Mallya. This time, it's that the Force India team is to give up with the Ferrari engines that propelled the cars further up the grid than expected despite there being a year to go on the customer engine supply agreement.

Mallya watching, or rather Mallya-quote watching, is something of a sport in our office. You get one point for finding a quote, and a bonus point if what he says comes true.

There are lots of points earned for spotting quotes but not many bonus points are awarded. For example, the not-quite-a-merger described in our Aviation section: aborted. Or the renaming of a UK soccer stadium: nothing doing.

In mid December, Mallya's Force India team, which we usually call Kingfisher because that's what it says on the tin, has strongly indicated that whilst Honda has decided that Formula One is too expensive both as constructor and participator hence both Honda-driven teams are no longer in the Championship, and even Formula One in general is putting substantial cost cutting measures in place, Force India will not only hold as many of its reportedly lavish parties in 2009 as it held in 2008 - but will actively increase its party-count. A fan-site says "Strangely but happily, it appears that Force India are not plagued by the same worries." Hm.... that's not what the figures for some of the Kingfisher businesses say.

In November, it was announced by Force India that the team would be fitting McLaren-Mercedes engines for 2009 in a five year deal. Strangely, the McLaren website is entirely silent on the topic, although Autosport magazine quotes McLaren's Martin Whitmarsh as saying ""Vijay has shown a lot of confidence in his commitment and investment in this partnership and us." So it's clearly happening. However, no bonus points yet: let's see the car start with a McLaren-Mercedes engine in the back before we award those.

And what about that time limit? Kingfisher sponsored Toyota (which the fansite referred to above disparages for its cost cutting measures). But part way through the agreement, it was cancelled (no word on what the terms were). And the same with the Ferrari engines.

Mallya has taken direct control of the team and Team Principal Colin Kolles and CTO Mike Gascoyne, credited with bringing the team from the back of the grid, are out of work. "Force India is my most difficult project to date and it has become clear that it requires more direct input from my side and greater performance accountability," Mallya told reporters in November.

Again, the airline will not be entirely happy with that, given its troubles - and the fact that Mallya personally took over the running of that company a short while ago, too.

There have been persistent rumours (unsubstantiated) that Kingfisher the airline is in serious arrears with its fuel suppliers although the drinks company that underpins the whole structure has reported reasonable returns.

Even so, Formula One is - even after cost cutting - a very expensive sport and many sponsors are questioning their involvement. Force India's biggest advantage is the space and airtime it gains in India. So long as that's a target market for international businesses, then renting out the side-pods shouldn't be as difficult as it may be for some other teams, even those further up the grid - although in the current financial crisis, no one is immune to cash drying up.

But Mallya doesn't even need to say anything to be in the news so no points for anyone claiming that he has said he wants to buy Honda F1. Although he has not disclaimed the reports, nor has he confirmed that he is interested. The report surfaced in "Motor Authority" and was repeated all over the internet. To misquote (soon-to-be) Sir Terry Pratchett, a rumour can run around the world before the truth has got its boots on.

But Indian newspapers are not giving up on the story: The Economic Times (Part of The Times of India) yesterday reported "Vijay Mallya's chances of owning the F1 team of Honda are now brighter with another front-runner Carlos Slim's Telmex Racing Team denying reports of the Mexcian billionaire buying the Japanese automaker's outfit." But it did so without a Mallya quote - and cited the same "Motor Authority" source as all the other rumours.