

F1: Button puts down the doubters

Just what does Jenson Button have to do to satisfy the critics?

Button's performance in Australia was knocked as a fluke - due to the Brawn diffuser and the appearance of the safety car. That he had dominated practice and qualifying was conveniently overlooked, as was the fact that his team-mate stormed through the field *after* his diffuser had been knocked off when he was rear-ended.

Then in Malaysia, having battled his way to the front and driven a masterly few laps to remain there both in the dry and in the increasingly dangerous rain, critics moaned that he won the race sitting under an umbrella. No matter that he had made it to pole on merit, and after a fumbled start has both the presence of mind and skill to pick himself up and get back in front despite never having driven the car in heavy rain.

In China, recognising a not-so-hot performance in heavy rain he drove in terrible conditions to a third place whilst taking the long-view that points make prizes - and written-off cars cost money that the BrawnGP team would rather not spend.

And so to the fourth Fly-Away race of the season: to where, with humidity levels at 17% rain is a distant memory but sandstorms are an ever present danger. Sandstorms are wierd: you think you are about to walk out of your hotel into early morning mist - but it's a mist that hurts as the sand cuts into your skin. And underfoot, sand like tiny ball-bearings reduce grip and the wind almost blows you over. And the sand gets in your eyes and ears and up your nose and in your mouth.

So think what it's like to be a racing car. You get sandblasted and your radiators get clogged up and your sticky tyres collect sand that then slips off as you try to go fast around corners, making the reduction in grip unpredictable and spitting you off into the, well - they would be wouldn't they - sand traps. And as a driver, that same sandblasting scratches your visor so, when the sun hits it at exactly the wrong angle, you can't see a thing.

But, fortunately, there was no sandstorm all weekend and Bahrain's clever trick of gluing the sand near the track into position (honestly: we don't make this stuff up, you know) held up to the light winds for race day.

Button started fourth, on the dirty side of the track - for some drivers behind him, that was not a bad thing: the clean side had an oil slick from an earlier race. Trulli and Glock has amazed everyone - including themselves and their team - by claiming both pole and second on the grid. With Vettel planning to storm away from third, Button's main threat was the unknown quantity of the Toyotas and his countryman, Hamilton.

Lewis Hamilton had surprised himself and his team by getting into fifth place on the grid. His KERS sytem would give him rocket-ship performance off the grid and perhaps 25 metres advantage by the entry into the first corner; and if he kept his finger on the button down the main straight, he would have enough left to defeat attacks coming out of the remaining overtaking places around the track.

He did - passing both Button and Vettell off the line and then anticipating that Button would be behind him out of every corner and not close enough to make a dive into the next one, Hamilton used the KERS to give extra drive out of the corners. But went around Vettell in turn one and set about Hamilton. For most of the first lap he sat on Hamilton's tail but KERS kept the McLaren in front. Until the last corner of the first lap: Button appeared from nowhere at the end of the lap, distracted Lewis, and then backed off slightly, Hamilton had run out of KERS and had to wait until he crossed the start/finish line for the next boost to be available. Button pulled up under Hamilton's rear wing and it was too late for Hamilton to use KERS to any real effect. Button popped out from the slipstream and dived underneath at turn one. After that, he just had to keep the pressure on the Toyotas and wait for them to make mistakes. Which the drivers didn't but the team did - particularly in the choice of tyres.

And, without a single mistake from driver or team - and with holes cut in the bodywork at the last minute (Rob Smedley, Massa's engineer, told Massa on the way to the grid "The Brawns" They've cut away the bodywork from around the engine.")

Like heavy rain, Brawn have not had the chance to do any hot weather testing, either. Frankly, with virtually no testing the results that the team is getting are remarkable. Rubens Barrichello finished 5th - after a tyre strategy went wrong: it had been a roll-of-the dice to try to get him out of traffic but it seemed that he was doomed to spend the entire race behind someone who was just slow enough to prevent him driving as fast as he liked, but just fast enough to make passing impossible. In fact, he was a victim of KERS: sitting for lap after lap behind KERS cars that had more grunt out of the corners than he could muster.

Button made fun of his detractors "I'm so happy to have seen the chequered flag without a safety car or red light in front of me." he said in post-race interview with a smile on his face. Hamilton paid a compliment to Button "he was just so fast through the coners he was on my tail all the time." But he was very pleased with fourth.

Trulli picked up third, from pole. He and Vettel had a close battle to the line after Toyota switched back to softer tyres and Vettel was stuck on the hard tyres that were a second a lap slower.

Again, the collapse of Ferrari makes news: although Kimi led the race for several laps, it was only because he went long in his second stint and everyone else around him had taken their second stop. He eventually finished 6th and collected Ferrari's first points of the season. But Massa's season is just going from bad to worse. In the opening moments he ran into Kimi and damaged his front wing. After two laps, he came in for a new nose, and then the telemetry went haywire so the team was unable to report to him on what the car was doing. Then the KERS went wrong. Despite turning it off and on again (rebooting? Is the software made by Microsoft?) the team decided it should be turned off. That meant he was carrying dead weight, making things even worse.

But even more startling was the dismal performance of BMW. Kubica had a hit on the first corner but due to a cock up - he calls it a miscommunication - he was not called in until after the second lap. One wonders if his team turns off the radio so they can't hear him moaning all the time. One of the fun parts (not) of a Sunday afternoon is eavesdropping on his endless complaints on the car-to-pit radio.

He eventually crawled in 18th - but even that was better than team-mate Heidfeld who finished 19th: in a Kubica-esque moment, he had reported a broken suspension when all that had happened was that he had knocked a chunk off his front wing. Mario Thiesson, the team's sporting director sounded almost as depressed as Kubica usually sounds when he said, in effect, that the team might as well have packed up and gone home after the first corner.

So, with carnage and despondency all around, Button went his imperious way. Responding to coded messages to take it easy (although both engine and gearbox can be replaced after this, the fourth race) he eased off but even so he was more than seven seconds ahead of Vettel, and more than 9 ahead of Trulli. Only one car dropped out - Nakajima, with an oil pressure problem. But only 12 were able to fend off Button as he sped around lapping cars with impunity.

And as he crossed the line, a gaggle of cars that he had lapped held station so as not to have to do an extra lap.

That one of those was Massa's Ferrari - which he lapped, then lapped again after a pit-stop, was especially sweet.

With Button and Barrichello as first and second in the Championship (but Vettel only one point behind Rubens) and the team on 50 points with the nearest contender, Red Bull, on 27.5 after four races it's starting to look as if Button is on his way to silencing the critics.

Those that are not too prejudiced to be fair, that is.

Fair is not what those who keep saying "but Brawn GP will lose its advantage when the other teams get similar diffusers," and a host of similar comments are being.

The truth is that Button's car was not the fastest in Bahrain. It was not the fastest, incidentally, in Australia or Malaysia either.

But Button still won.

It's time to stop the complaints and be as happy for Button as he is for the team that he paid to join, all those years ago.