

F1: Force India hound Ferrari to the finishing line in Spa

Can this Formula One season throw up any more surprises or any more good news stories? Seemingly, just when we think we are running out of great new things, along comes another. This time, it's Force India - pole position, first away at the start, beaten only by the use of the KERS in the Ferrari after a safety-car restart.

When BBC commentator went into the Ferrari garage towards the end of the Belgian GP at Spa, he did not expect the answer he was given. "Is Kimi looking after his engine?" was the question. "No," was the reply. "He's driving as hard as he can. Fisichella is too fast."

This is a story of many parts.

First, I really expected Fisi to fluff the start: he's not been on pole position for so long that I expected the pressure to get to him just enough to affect his launch by a maybe a couple of thousandths of a second. Instead, he shot off in a flawless dash to the first corner. Behind him, Barrichello, made a slow start when the AntiStall kicked in, and the field went into chaos mode.

Cars everywhere, no one where they expected to be as they arrived at the first corner, then on to the second where Grosjean ran into the back of Button (later saying Button took him out). In the ensuing mayhem, Alguersari drove into the back of Hamilton, wrecking both cars. Alonso took a big knock on his front left wheel that appeared to cause no problems - but problems became manifest at his first pit stop and he was retired one lap after rejoining. All three, then, paid the price of poor qualifying and starting a race down amongst the dead men.

Trulli started second and fully expected to be battling for the lead. But in the dash to the first corner, he had slotted in behind Heidfeld - and then ran into the BMW's rear wheel, shredding his front wing. A pitstop under safety car conditions dropped him to the back of the field. When he was asked how he had got second on the grid he said "it's a mystery." What was a bigger mystery was how both he and Glock trailed around at the back after their stops - and how Trulli's brakes wore so badly the team decided it was too dangerous for him to continue. Where did the pace go? With rumours that Toyota may yet not enter next year, the team really has to find out what's wrong.

Barrichello suffered a similar fate to Trulli: once he nagged his car into getting going, he was in the middle of the pack heading into the first corner when he was hit on the front end first by a car from the right taking the inside line on the corner and then by a car on the left taking the outside line. That tossed his decent qualifying and he, like Trulli dropped to the back. A change in strategy, to change to what was, in effect, a one-stop strategy allowed him to get his now very heavy car up through the field and eventually finish seventh, getting two more points to eat into Jenson's championship lead. As he pulled into the pit lane at the end of the race, an oil leak that had threatened to bring his race to an end with two or three laps to go finally turned into a fire.

Button's dismal qualifying performance was due in part to the same handling problem as had afflicted him in Valencia: Rubens likes a loose rear end, Button hates it. The cars are set up for the individual drivers but in the last two weekend, Button's car has visibly more tail-happy than he likes. There may be good reason for this: Brawn is continually prejudiced by the Bridgestone tyres which are taking longer and longer to heat up. The Brawn cars are very easy on the tires for the simple reason that they go where they are pointed. At no point this year have we seen a Brawn driver sawing at the wheel to bring an errant car under control.

But tyres don't heat up much going in a straight line, nor do they get heat transfer from brakes on long tracks with lots of flat-out running. So, long, sweeping courses of traditional European races are not ideal for Brawn. The only way for Button - who is much the smoother of the two Brawn drivers - is to slide the car around the corners, creating lateral forces that stress a and therefore heat the tyres. Barrichello, who likes a car that slides, is much happier doing that.

But Bridgestone also come into the mix: they decide what tyres will be available on any given weekend. The tyres are "control tyres" which means that everyone uses the same. In Spa - as they will in Monza in two weeks' time - they have supplied to compounds with very little difference between them. This means that there is not much chance of getting two-thirds of a race on a preferred compound. Again, for Brawn - for whom grip is the critical factor especially in Button's car, this is again factor.

And, lastly, the weather: Spa is always a challenge. Bathed in hot sunshine for part of the track and shade on another part, track temperatures vary widely around the long circuit - the only track which is so long that the organisers don't allow the winning driver - or anyone else - to complete a victory lap. If it's not hot and sunny, it's cloudy and raining: usually part of the circuit is better suited to powerboating while another part is bone dry. But not this year: this year it was sunny, shadowy- and cold everywhere. The only way for Button to get heat into his tyres was to load up the weight and slide the back around, and late brake to try to build up some heat. Starting at 14th he moved up 4 places in a corner and a half before being punted out.

Hamilton's team quite simply have no idea why his car was such a dog in qualifying after being the comeback kid for the last two races. McLaren went back to their original drawings for the car having decided that tinkering with it wasn't working. They found a basic misplacement in the

weight distribution. The fixed that and the car behaved as it should have done all along. Until Spa. Hamilton, having also had problems with the AntiStall as he left the grid got squashed in the first corner then caught up in the second corner mess. He would have preferred to have been racing, even from 13th he said. And there is little doubt that he would have scored a point or two if he had been able to continue. But another podium was never on the cards.

A Ferrari win wasn't on the cards either - but it happened. On lap 5, when the safety car came in, Kimi sat behind Fisi until the top of the hill, then blasted past using KERS. That, according to all the form books, should have been that. But Fisi didn't go away: at the end of the long straight he came partially alongside the Ferrari. And for the remaining 39 laps Fisi was never more than 2 seconds behind - and generally less than one second. Kimi - even with KERS - could keep out of trouble coming out of corners but Fisi was, without doubt, driving the better package.

That's the amazing, surprising and good news story for this week: Force India is estimated to have a budget of around a quarter of that of Ferrari. And yet after almost 200 miles of racing, their car was slightly over half a second behind that of Kimi.

OK, so the track favours the Force India car which goes like stink in a straight line but is not so hot around corners - but Fisi was not losing out the Kimi in the twiddly bits at either end of the lap. Monza is more like Spa than it is like the modern purpose built tracks and so Force India must be regarded with some favour for that track.

The race saw close racing in packs - often four or five cars together - through the entire race giving the lie to the argument that if you want close racing, you have to call in Hermann Tillke. Tracks like Spa deliver spectacular racing amid glorious scenery and an atmosphere that a white concrete and steel canopy - no matter how pretty - cannot create.

After that, the series goes back to the sort of tracks on which Brawn were so dominant in the early part of the season.

Whether all the tinkering with the car in the meantime has undermined the fundamentals that made the car so unbeatable then remains to be seen. But for sure, there are more and more competitors lining up to find out.

But in the meantime: Ferrari have their first win for a year, and Force India their first podium ever.