

F1: Friday Practice for Bahrain GP shows consistent spread from top to bottom

Bahrain. 09:00. Mechanics have been working all night - partly to get things ready, partly because some only arrived yesterday and partly because it's cooler at night. The first engines fire up and out onto track come the first two cars. Jarno Trulli is followed by Heikki Kovalainen: it's the first time a Lotus has been at a Formula One race meeting since the end of the 1994 season; it's six months to the day since the FIA granted the team entry. And it's all been achieved from scratch with no takeover of an existing team and no backing of an established GP2 or similar team... and that's not all.

By the end of the day, new aero parts were fitted to the T127 (that was how the lunch break was spent) and by the end of the day all cars had done a mix of high and low fuel load, soft and hard tyre runs. As the cars are still in shakedown-mode, Friday practice had the added burden of reliability testing as well as trying out multiple setups. But it is important not to read too much into Friday: traditionally Ferrari use it for genuine testing and almost always seem to be off the pace on Friday, only to use all they learned on Saturday and Sunday.

But as the day wore on, fastest laps were being set - and they were not as suggested by the Spanish pre-season testing.

Ferrari, as usual, did not display out and out pace on Friday. The new twiddly bit of the track clearly added a new dimension to Friday with the more experienced drivers seemingly having more trouble with it. There was a general consensus that more time was needed.

Sutil surprised early in the morning by topping the timesheets, but his glee was short lived - even so he ended the day 8th fastest.

Hulkenberg shook up Williams - almost a second faster than his team-leader Barrichello.

Mark Webber's having trouble just getting his head around the track, it seems: he is one who has said he doesn't like the new section: that's not too surprising - Webber is a driver who excels at getting into a rhythm and settling down to click off the laps, one corner at a time. The new section artificially breaks up the old flowing track which means Webber can't keep the same mindset for the whole lap.

Time differences that on Saturday would be catastrophic tell us nothing on Friday so the three or four tenths between the cars at the sharp end aren't worth analysis. But at the bottom end of the field, the times are so far away from those at the top that they are informative.

HRT rolled out their car for the first time today. The entry formerly known as Campos had not made it to any testing. Bruno Senna, in his first proper drive in a Formula One car was 11 seconds off the pace and stopped out on the circuit shortly before the end of the session but no information was available as to why. His team-mate, Karun Chandhok, did not record a time because his car was not ready in time. The Stewards will need to rule on whether he can race - the general principle is that the car, if not the driver, has to run on Friday. .

Talking of the Stewards: there has been a reversal of the FIA's policy over the diffuser last year. This year the FIA has ruled, before Friday practice, on the question of the McLaren rear wing. It's fine they say. So now there is no point in Red Bull or Ferrari making a protest in Bahrain.

Virgin, who are proud of the fact that their car is designed on a computer (conveniently forgetting that Arrows did the same a decade ago), were quicker than HRT - which is not too surprising as they had, at least done some testing.

But of the new teams, it was Lotus - with a second car that was still in pieces until a few days ago and new parts arriving at the track this morning - that proved to be quickest - and not far off the back of the pack. Kovalainen was four and a half seconds behind Rosberg, the fastest man today. But - and here's the telling part of the tale - with a brand new car and an untried Cosworth he was only one and a half seconds off the time of Buemi's Toro Rosso with a proven Ferrari engine. For sure, Buemi had a poor day - but his team-mate Alguersuari didn't and he was only slightly faster. Barrichello's Williams was about 2.5 seconds quicker than Kovalainen.

But no one did even close to a race distance: as the afternoon temperatures climbed to 50 degrees (C) new challenges developed. Virgin had comms problem: the off-car electronics overheated and car-to-pit comms were patchy. There is no doubt that tomorrow's free practice will see some shaking up of this order - and probably a greater front-to-rear spread. Qualifying will see some crashes as drivers, unused to the cars and the dust will slide off, creating a false idea of grids to come. And on Sunday, the fact that so much is new, including managing fuel loads, and the heat (will they be able to keep the fuel in the tanks cool?) plus the fact that several of the drivers have not, or not recently, completed a full F1 race means that the race will almost certainly turn into a battle of attrition.

If the new teams can just keep the cars going, with the new points system, then this weekend is actually looking good for at least one of the new teams to get a car into the points.

It's a long way from Button's dream start to last season but there's a huge difference: in Button's case, there was a car but no team, at least not formally, although all the infrastructure was there and working towards an entry even in the darkest days. But for the new teams, especially Lotus which has had the shortest time and no established infrastructure to fall back on (unlike Virgin with Manor and HRT with Campos) a single point will be as great an achievement as was Button's win in the first race of the 2009 season.

As for who will be at the sharp end on Saturday evening, that's still wide open. It would be a brave man who would choose between Ferrari, McLaren, Mercedes and Red Bull - but.... Williams and even Force India look like they may claim a wild-card entry to the top four rows.

Hold onto your hats: the 2010 season is going to be a very interesting ride.

Times:

1. Nico Rosberg Mercedes 1m 55.409s
2. Lewis Hamilton McLaren-Mercedes 1m 55.854s
3. Michael Schumacher Mercedes 1m 55.903s
4. Jenson Button McLaren-Mercedes 1m 56.076s
5. Sebastian Vettel Red Bull-Renault 1m 56.459s
6. Nico Hulkenberg Williams-Cosworth 1m 56.501s
7. Felipe Massa Ferrari 1m 56.555s
8. Adrian Sutil Force India-Mercedes 1m 56.583s*
9. Vitaly Petrov Renault 1m 56.750s
10. Robert Kubica Renault 1m 57.041s*
11. Fernando Alonso Ferrari 1m 57.140s
12. Vitantonio Liuzzi Force India-Mercedes 1m 57.194s*
13. Mark Webber Red Bull-Renault 1m 57.255s*
14. Pedro de la Rosa BMW Sauber-Ferrari 1m 57.255s
15. Kamui Kobayashi BMW Sauber-Ferrari 1m 57.352s
16. Rubens Barrichello Williams-Cosworth 1m 57.452s
17. Jaime Alguersuari Toro Rosso-Ferrari 1m 57.722s*
18. Sebastien Buemi Toro Rosso-Ferrari 1m 58.399s*
19. Heikki Kovalainen Lotus-Cosworth 2m 00.873s
20. Jarno Trulli Lotus-Cosworth 2m 00.990s
21. Timo Glock Virgin-Cosworth 2m 02.037s
22. Lucas di Grassi Virgin-Cosworth 2m 02.188s
23. Bruno Senna HRT-Cosworth 2m 06.968s
24. Karun Chandhok HRT-Cosworth no time