



F1 Digest – Prelude to the Belgian Grand Prix

Christine: The Belgian Grand Prix has always been a popular stop on the Formula One calendar, and its stock only increases when it brings us back from the four weeks of summer break. With an enforced fortnight of factory shutdown, the teams, the drivers, the fans, everyone is eager to get back to work, and there is no better place to rekindle the flames of the F1 season than at the legendary Spa-Francorchamps. Of course it has Eau Rouge, the challenging uphill chicane that is often proclaimed the best corner in the sport. But it also has an intense rest of the lap, great surroundings, brilliant fans, and some incredibly changeable weather. There's an awful lot of fun in store this weekend at Spa.

Mr C: Welcome to F1 Digest – Prelude to the Belgian Grand Prix. This is your Sidepodcast preview for the weekend's racing action at Spa. Here's your host, Christine Blachford.

Christine: It's almost pointless to talk about the weather at Spa from this far ahead, because the track has a micro-climate all to itself. Not only that, but as it is such a long circuit, the weather at one end can be completely different to that at the other. There aren't many tracks where you could do with both wet and dry tyres on the same lap.

Nevertheless, the long-range weather forecasts have done their best and there is rumoured to be plenty of sunshine on Friday, that gradually descends into clouds on Saturday for qualifying, and then even further to rain on race day. Changeable conditions are almost a given at Spa, so expect the fans in the grandstands to need umbrellas at some point throughout the weekend.

The track is another of those that began life as an extended monster of a circuit – 14 kilometres in this case. With a mixture of public roads and dedicated track, the length has been shortened, but it is still one of the longest laps on the F1 calendar at just over 7 kilometres. That means there are only 44 laps to make up the full 300 kilometre race distance, but each one of them has the potential to be highly entertaining.

About 70% of the lap is taken at full throttle, which means there'll be plenty of stress on the engines, and getting the balance on the car right is crucial. Reliability at this end of the season can start to be a factor, and tricky tracks like Spa can break even the best cars. Last year there were 38 pit stops during a race, and the estimated pit stop loss was just over 17 seconds - that may be a bit more now that the pit lane speed limits have changed, though. Strategy experts predict this will be a one or two stop race for most drivers.

Having dominated the last few races for all the wrong reasons, Pirelli should be able to leave the headlines to other people in Belgium. With the combination of 2013 compounds and 2012 construction, the new tyres appear to be holding up under the strain of a full race distance. There are some teams who have been negatively affected by the mid-season change of rubber, with Force India in particular unhappy about the tweaks that have been made.

Team Principal Vijay Mallya spoke out, angered that they understood the last tyres and have lost all that data. "I'm not suggesting what happened, with tyres delaminating, is the best scene for F1," Mallya argues, "but having said that, everybody has a level playing field." That argument only holds so much weight, as everyone still has a level playing field, it's just that the level has changed.

Meanwhile, this weekend it is the hard and medium tyres in use, the orange and white sidewalls respectively. These tyres have been selected to deal with the high demands of the track – a long, long lap with some very high speeds, and of course, the vertical load placed on the tyres, particularly through Eau Rouge. Spa is a good track for



overtaking, so qualifying position isn't the be all and end all of the race weekend, and with such a long lap, timing pit stops perfectly will be the key to a successful Sunday.

Tucked away in the heart of Europe, surrounded by forests, and with a hugely long track, the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps presents a unique challenge for drivers. The track has been on the calendar since the Formula One World Championship began in 1950 and has been a popular presence since its first outing. Financial troubles meant there was no Belgian Grand Prix in 2006 but since then it has gone from strength to strength. Home to many other racing series as well, including the endurance event of Spa 24 Hours and a lengthy 2CV race, the track gets plenty of use throughout the year. The history would favour Kimi Räikkönen, who has won four of the last eight events. Ferrari have also had good form, although McLaren took victory at the 2012 event, with Jenson Button behind the wheel of the winning car.

Despite being in the middle of nowhere, with facilities that could do with an upgrade, and a higher than average chance of rain, it's a race that many fans want to visit. The campsites are full of cheering F1 fans, happy to see the sport back after the summer break. Everyone should be well rested, all the race teams, and even those left back in the factory, after their enforced shutdown. But it's time to get back to work, with the penultimate race of the European leg of the season.

Teams need to make the most of their ability to send trucks back and forth from the factory as they please. We'll soon be back to flyaway races, where spare parts are at a premium and upgrades are few and far between. With Spa and then Monza finishing off this part of the season, it's a good time to bow out of Europe in historic fashion with some classic racing.

Sebastian Vettel and Red Bull both still have their stranglehold on the respective championships, but Vettel has a new challenger in the form of Kimi Räikkönen. The Finn jumped ahead of Fernando Alonso after the last race in Hungary, but there's only one point between second and third at the moment. There are five drivers who have crossed the 100 point mark, Lewis Hamilton and Mark Webber amongst them. Nico Rosberg is the next one down, currently with 84 points. After the Hungarian Grand Prix, Giedo van der Garde jumped ahead of Max Chilton, pushing the Brit to last in the standings, although neither driver is off the mark yet.

A team that did manage to jump off zero was Williams, who along with Pastor Maldonado, picked up their first point of the season so far at the last race. They still sit ninth, behind Sauber, who have just seven points on the board. Up front, it's Red Bull with an almost 70 point lead over second place Mercedes. Ferrari and Lotus have 11 points between them, whilst the gap down to Force India in fifth is well over 100 points. The front runners, the midfield and those left behind now have their own distinct battles to fight, and swapping to a different portion of the standings is going to be nigh on impossible.

With only seven points, Sauber need to start seeing some real results, particularly if they are to impress their new Russian investors, and Nico Hulkenberg has pinpointed the challenges of the track, he says: "There are a lot of medium and high-speed corners, where you need the downforce, especially in sector two. But you also need to lose the drag on the straight, because there are long straights, especially out of turn one through Eau Rouge, which is flat, and then again coming back to the start and finish line."

There's plenty of attention on the Ferrari team, after Fernando Alonso was told off by the big bosses for criticising the car after the Hungarian Grand Prix. Although nothing hard-hitting was said, it's unusual for Alonso to hit out at his team, and even more unusual for them to hit back. Perhaps the break will have mellowed them all out though, as Alonso now says: "I did well in 2005 when I came second and also back in Formula 3000. So far, I've never been in with a real chance of fighting for the win and I've often retired at Spa, usually for reasons of plain bad luck or with



technical problems or down to my own mistakes. So it would be great to make up for that this year, picking up all those lost points.”

Finally, last year’s winner Jenson Button knows that this time he’s unlikely to have a car ready to challenge for the podium, but he says he’ll still make the most of the opportunity to race on such a great track. He says: "The thing about Spa is that it just feels awesome to nail a quick lap around there - you need a car that's perfectly synced to the driver, because it's such a long lap, and there are so many big corners, that you need to find that perfect balance. And getting the set-up right - and running flat-out for nearly two minutes - feels incredible.”

Mr C: This show was brought to you by Sidepodcast with facts and figures from Pirelli s.P.a and Williams F1. If you want to keep up with everything over a race weekend, visit sidepodcast.com for live comments and lap by lap coverage of qualifying and the race.

