



F1 Digest – Prelude to the Italian Grand Prix

Christine: You're likely to find most previews, audio or visual, to the Italian Grand Prix starting with an emotional and moving montage. With a rich racing history such as this, there's a lot of love for the Monza circuit. The Italian fans are unique in temperament, rabid about the success of their beloved Ferrari team. The pressure is on for the team to pull something out of the bag, for the home crowd, and for their own championship challenge. But, the Monza track is fast and furious, a challenge in its own way, despite the lack of corners. Each inch of tarmac oozes historical significance, ramping up the aura of the weekend every step of the way. Essentially, Monza sums up what Formula One is all about – speed and supremacy.

Mr C: This is F1 Digest – Prelude to the Italian Grand Prix – a race preview brought to you by Sidepodcast, covering all the need-to-know facts about the upcoming race weekend at Monza. Here's your host, Christine Blachford.

Christine: Belgium managed to spring a surprise in terms of the weather, as despite constant talk of rain, it was a dry race. The long range forecasts for Monza this weekend show a similar pattern to that which we expected at Spa – sunshine on Friday, which should start to cloud over on Saturday for qualifying, and then the potential for scattered storms and showers on Sunday.

Drivers at Spa were hoping for weather conditions that would suit their car – some hoping for the race to stay dry as they were faster on the slicks, others hoping for the rain to appear to mix things up and give them a bit of a chance at the weather-related lottery. As fans, I think there's always room in our hearts for a little bit of precipitation.

So, where do you begin with a track like this? How about at the start/finish straight, one of four high speed stretches that are separated by a few kinks - with those being the prime overtaking spots around a lap. The first chicane is extremely tight, and for each of the corners, getting a good exit is absolutely crucial to maximise the top speed in the following long straights.

The final corner, the Parabolica requires a lot of concentration, braking hard into the first part, slowly turning in and sticking with it as the corner unfolds itself and throws a driver back out onto the home straight.

It's no surprise to find that full throttle is more than 75% of the lap, and that the downforce and cooling requirements for this circuit are low. The fastest pit stop ever recorded was last year with a 2.7 second stop, but the expected strategy to be favoured is a one stop - so they do need to be fast. There's a 40% chance of the safety car making an appearance, which could tie in with the fact that whilst the track continues to evolve to become more safe, drivers are still concerned about the lack of run-off areas at some of the trickier sections.

After one high-profile puncture during the last race weekend, eyebrows were starting to rise again over the state of the Pirelli tyres – however, they were durable enough to last the race and that must be why the same compounds are making their way to Monza. With such high speeds, and so much of the lap on the throttle, the real challenge this weekend will be degradation.

The hard and medium compounds, orange and white sidewalls respectively, will be the tyres on offer, and Pirelli – also celebrating their home race in Italy – have pinpointed three parts of the track which will be the hardest. First, the initial chicane, for its hard braking. Then, the Variante Ascari for some pretty swift changes in direction. And lastly, the Parabolica, the oh-so-important but oh-so-sweeping corner that brings drivers back onto the home straight.



The Italian race is the last of the European leg of the F1 season, with the rest of the events sweeping through Asia, the Middle East and on to the Americas, before finishing up in Brazil. This is the twelfth of nineteen races, and although teams and drivers have just come back from their enforced holidays, the toll of the season will be starting to creep in just a little, particularly as the battles hot up.

The track is tucked away in the green and pleasant Italian countryside, just north of Milan, and it has played host to Formula One races since long before the official World Championships came into being. As already discussed, the race holds a special place in Ferrari's heart - their home event, with thronging fans, and a factory just down the road. Michael Schumacher is the most successful driver at the track, having won five races there.

Monza hasn't really favoured anyone over the last few years, however. Lewis Hamilton won the race in 2012, with Sebastian Vettel and Fernando Alonso taking victory before him. Of course, in 2008 this was the site of Vettel's Toro Rosso victory that thrust him into the spotlight, helped him make the move up to Red Bull and, well, you know the rest.

With another supreme win in Belgium, Sebastian Vettel's course towards a fourth championship is looking clearer than ever – particularly as his nearest competitors continue to squabble amongst themselves. Kimi Räikkönen's DNF allowed both Fernando Alonso and Lewis Hamilton to jump ahead of him in the standings, but they are still 46 points or more away from Vettel at the front.

The big change in the constructor standings came after the race at Spa, with McLaren finally able to get ahead of Force India, and eking out a four-point lead on them in fifth place. However, team boss at Force India, Vijay Mallya, thinks that isn't an end to the fight, saying it will be "a neck and neck race."

At the top, Red Bull have a storming 77 point lead over second place Mercedes. It's between second and third that the interest lies, as there are just 17 points between Mercedes and third place Ferrari, and that's another fight that could be neck and neck to the end of the season.

Ross Brawn has been part of Ferrari's history, and is now trying his hand at making some more history with Mercedes, and he has fond memories of the Italian weekend. He says: "The Italian Grand Prix marks the traditional end of Formula 1's European season and is one of my favourite race weekends on the calendar. From an engineering perspective, Monza is unique and requires a special low-downforce aerodynamic package to make the most of the high-speed layout which also places great importance on the strength of the engine on the long straights."

Caterham had a freakishly high point in Belgium, with Van der Garde posting the third fastest time in the first session of qualifying. They're not exactly expecting to repeat that this weekend, but Giedo does think they're on the right path, saying: "The whole team had a lot of praise for what we did in Spa, and it's good to see people understanding that what we're doing now is exactly what we said we would do this year - learn, improve and deliver the results we want. 14th in Hungary and both qualifying and the race in Spa show how the package is coming on and it's a good feeling for me and the whole team."

Finally, the last word has to go to the Ferrari team, who are keen to point out that where other tracks minimise the difference between engines, the racing at Monza is flat out. As Head of Engines, Luca Marmorini says: "Each single horsepower has a greater influence on the lap time. It's a very difficult track, because the drivers apply full throttle for almost the entire lap, around 80% of it. Therefore engine reliability is a critical factor." And Felipe Massa sums it all up perfectly: "It's a different Grand Prix to all the others, the fastest on the calendar, with the highest top speeds, as well as fantastic grandstands packed with fantastic fans."



Mr C: This episode was brought to you by Sidepodcast with facts and figures from Williams F1 and Pirelli s.P.a. Keep up to date with all you need to know over a race weekend on sidepodcast.com with comments and minute by minute LIVE TEXT coverage of qualifying and the race.

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