



F1 Digest – Prelude to the Japanese Grand Prix

Christine: Last weekend, Formula One raced to a mediocre response in terms of fan turnout. Just seven days on, things couldn't be more different, as the 22 drivers get set to race in front of the supremely passionate and enthusiastic Japanese crowds. The Suzuka track is a driver favourite, it often delivers some good racing, and Japan has been the setting for a championship decider or two in the past. The 2013 title could be set this weekend, although it's more likely to be in a couple of race's time. Regardless of the championship outcome though, all we want is some great qualifying performances, an action-packed race, and hopefully for Mark Webber to get to the end of the weekend without his car catching fire.

Mr C: This is F1 Digest – Prelude to the Japanese Grand Prix. This show is brought to you by Sidepodcast, with all the preview information you need ahead of this weekend's race. Here is your host, Christine Blachford.

Christine: It's getting harder and harder to predict the weather, and the early forecasts for each race weekend prove that. Last week, there was talk of a typhoon drawing near to the Korean International Circuit, but it didn't materialise. This week, the long-range forecasts suggest sunny skies for both Saturday and Sunday at Suzuka, with perhaps a little rain on Friday. We know that the Japanese Grand Prix often offers up some damp running though, so expect rain to be present at some point during the weekend.

Suzuka is instantly recognisable for its figure-of-eight layout, as the drivers cross over the top of the track halfway round. There are also a couple of super-famous corners, such as the 130R and Spoon Curve, but all of it is a significant challenge. The first sector requires supreme concentration, is very difficult to get right, and can punish drivers that get it wrong. The second sector features some tricky turns including a tight and very slow hairpin, leading into the third, final and much faster sector.

Altogether, the track is just over 5.8 kilometres long so there will be 53 laps of the circuit to make the full race distance. Drivers are at full throttle for about 66% of the lap, and there's about a 56% chance of a safety car making an appearance. The expected ideal strategy for the race will be a two-stopper, and the fastest pit stop from last year was 2.2 seconds. Blink and you really will miss it.

Pirelli suffered a rather embarrassing tyre blowout during the Korean race, when Sergio Pérez locked up his tyres only to have the rubber explode on him round the following straight. It was lucky no significant damage was done, but it was eerily similar to the Silverstone race. Recently, Fernando Alonso had raised concerns about the tyres. Although to a fan's eyes, they have deadened the excitement of the early season somewhat, they are meant to be safer, and the Spaniard didn't think they were delivering on any front. He said: "I am sure all the cars, if they pushed 100 per cent from the start of the lap, they would not last 5 kilometres. I'm not blaming the tyres, but they are not good."

After the race, Mark Webber was less subtle about his remarks, having picked up a puncture and narrowly missing out on the flying remains of a tyre after Pérez's incident. He said: "The drivers aren't super important – it is what other people want. The tyres are wearing a lot and they also explode a bit, but that is for Pirelli to sort out." In their defence, Paul Hembery said: "It's maybe a different input if you're having to manage the tyres and you don't want to do it... If we had been asked to do no degradation and no pitstops then that is what we will have done."

The war of words continues, and meanwhile, Pirelli have chosen the hard and medium compounds for the weekend, hoping the more durable rubber will cope with the challenges of the high-speed and high-energy sections, as well as



what can be an abrasive surface for the tyres to run on. Last year, Pirelli brought the hards and softs, but they've closed the gap a little with the all-round mediums in action once more.

As a back to back race with Korea, there has been little time for drivers or teams to think about what happened, or learn and adapt from it. Time is running out on the 2013 season, too, and with the championships all but sealed up by Red Bull, it's not a surprise to see other teams less focused on the end of this year, and more concerned about the regulation changes for the next.

The Japanese race is hugely popular though, with Suzuka offering up some memorable corners, and some very passionate fans getting involved. Japan isn't as present in F1 as it used to be, with no Honda or Toyota, no Bridgestone, and no current F1 racers representing the country. The nearest they have at the moment is Jenson Button, who had a long history with Honda, has a Japanese girlfriend and a huge fondness for the country. He considers it his second, or perhaps third, home race of the season. And there are signs that the country may be ready to embrace the sport again, and vice versa, as Honda are set to make their big comeback with McLaren in 2015, and a lot of fans are looking forward to the return of that partnership.

The big news in the title fight going into this weekend is that Sebastian Vettel could potentially secure the championship in Japan. It wouldn't be the first time Japan has played host to a championship decider but if Vettel wins, he'll need Fernando Alonso to finish lower than eighth. There are still technically four drivers in with a shout at the top spot, but now our attention is firmly on the permutations for Vettel's win. It seems unlikely it will be decided this weekend, but it's a very real possibility.

Further down the table, Nico Hülkenberg picked up a very healthy points haul from his fourth place finish in Korea, jumping up two places to sit 11th above Adrian Sutil. It will be interesting to see if he can overhaul the five points that now sit between him and former teammate Paul di Resta, who is currently tenth with 36 points to Nico's 31.

Meanwhile, in the team standings, Sauber drew level on points with Toro Rosso, and moved ahead thanks to the fourth place. It's unlikely they can make a dent on Force India before the end of the year, though, as you need to add Sauber and Toro Rosso's points haul together to come back to Force India's 62. At the top, Red Bull compounded their dominant season by breaking into the 400s. Their ruling season of 2011 saw them with a total of 650. There are just over 200 points left available for constructor's, so they won't be able to match that, but if their season continues how it has been recently, they may be able to get very close.

I mentioned Jenson Button earlier and the driver expands on his love of the track, saying the unforgiving nature is much better than at other circuits with plenty of run-off. He explains: "At Suzuka, if you run wide through the Esses, or go off the track at the exit of the Degners, you're going to find yourself in the gravel. And I like that - I think it rewards those who don't make mistakes, and it makes for better racing, because you have to stay honest and focused."

Pastor Maldonado also thinks the Suzuka circuit is a formidable challenge, pinpointing all the things that need to go right during setup: "You need to find a good overall car balance, the tyres need to be operating within the right temperatures and pressures, aero efficiency must be good and mechanically you need to have the right set-up. Without these elements coming together, you feel a noticeable drop in performance and you can pay a high penalty in terms of laptime."

Finally, Romain Grosjean finds it hard to put into words what it is about Suzuka that is so special, he says: "Every driver has races that are special to them for one reason or another – a home Grand Prix, or the venue for their first win maybe – but I think if you ask most racers they will tell you there's just something about this place that's a little



bit different. This will be only my third time driving the track, but I've been looking forward to it ever since the flag dropped in Korea; it's simply fantastic.”

Mr C: This F1 Digest episode comes to you from Sidepodcast, with facts and figures from Williams F1. To stay up to date with the racing action from Japan, visit Sidepodcast.com for lap by lap coverage of qualifying and the Grand Prix, plus live comments and results.

