



F1 Digest – Prelude to the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix

Christine: Three races to go in the 2013 season and we already know who our champions are - Red Bull and Sebastian Vettel did the business in India. That gives us three weekends where there will either be chaos as there's nothing to lose, or nothing to watch as the teams have little to play for. It's a shame that the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix finds itself following the championship showdown, as it isn't one of the more popular venues on the calendar, but it leads us on to the better races in the US and Brazil. Let's hope events this weekend take the chaotic turn.

Mr C: Welcome to F1 Digest – Prelude to the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix. This is your preview show with all the information required for F1's twilight race this weekend. Here's your host, Christine Blachford.

Christine: As you might expect, the weather forecast for the coming weekend shows sunny skies and high temperatures for each of the days of track action. Highs look set to reach 33 degrees with lows, if you can call them that, of 24. There is the additional challenge of the time the sessions take place. Although not a full night race, Abu Dhabi starts the event in daylight and ends under floodlights, and as the night draws in, the temperatures will start to drop. This is super important when it comes to tyre wear... but more on that later.

The Abu Dhabi track is, how to put it politely, less exciting than others on the calendar. With acres of run off area at each corner, mistakes aren't punished, and although scrupulously clean and shiny looking, the action rarely delivers exactly what we would hope. There are five long stretches that allow drivers to get up to high speeds, and the corners that follow them aren't that punishing either, meaning overtaking spots are few and far between.

Turn one is a ninety degree left, quicker than most initial corners. Further on, turn seven leads onto the massively long back straight - 1.2 kilometres of breathing space. Two more corners lead onto another stretch of track that's not quite straight but might as well be. The final sector is slowed right down, with another ninety degree turns that dip under the hotel and round back onto the home straight. The pit lane exit is a controversial one, as it goes through a tunnel onto the track to feed back out into the action. So far there hasn't been a problem with it, but you never know.

Last year, the fastest pit stop was 2.4 seconds, and there were 30 stops in total. The chances of a safety car are 50/50, and the race is run anti-clockwise.

The tyre choice in India allowed for strategy to dominate what would otherwise have been an even less exciting race. The gap between the soft and medium compounds allowed for a slow-burner of an afternoon, and we could be on for more of the same this weekend in Abu Dhabi. Pirelli have opted for the same compound choices as last week – softs and mediums. The temperatures will be lower, though, and dropping, as the twilight sets in.

Motorsport Director at Pirelli, Paul Hembery, explained the decision: "The way the track temperature falls has an effect on both wear and degradation, meaning that teams are able to do longer runs even on the softer compound later in the race." This could help those drivers who found the softer tyres almost unusable during the Indian Grand Prix.

It's back to back races this weekend, with teams heading swiftly to Abu Dhabi after the Indian race. That means a quick turn around, and little time to focus on updates to the car - if any of the teams are still doing that kind of thing, rather than looking ahead to next year. The Yas Marina circuit is purpose built and integrated with its surroundings, the hotel and the marina with lots of yachts are all part and parcel of the weekend.



The track isn't much used outside of the F1 weekend, but it does host the occasional test - Pirelli have particularly gotten a lot of mileage there - and there are a few demo runs now and then. It's open to the public too, and a popular venue for runners. There's a sub-culture growing around running race-tracks, and the Yas Marina Circuit must be one of the more accessible for those in the vicinity.

On a race weekend though, the public are restricted to the grandstands, or perhaps a great view from the hotel.

Big congratulations have to go to Sebastian Vettel and Red Bull Racing for wrapping up both driver and constructor championships in India. With the final three races set to run without the pressure of a championship, we'll either get a free-for-all of crazy driving, or a lack of motivation throughout the field. There are still battles ongoing, however, behind the title winners.

In the driver's championship, Lewis Hamilton closed up the gap to Kimi Räikkönen who currently sits third. Nico Rosberg also leaped up the order, with his podium finish in India. He's now just four points off Mark Webber in fifth, after the Red Bull driver retired from the last race. Romain Grosjean has drawn level on points with Felipe Massa, both with 102, but Romain takes seventh for now, based on results. Further back, we still have five drivers with no points, but realistically only Valtteri Bottas is in with a shot of remedying that before the season ends.

In the team fight, Mercedes overtook Ferrari at the last race, but there are still just 14 points between them. Lotus have also kept themselves in the fight, albeit at a distance – they're just 24 points behind Ferrari. Force India and Sauber have also been vocal about their battle – with Sauber desperately trying to catch up and overhaul their rivals for sixth place. Force India secured a double points finish in India, however, so the gap is up to 23 now. There's still a lot to play for, and three races to do it in.

Sauber have a lot of ground to make up, then, and Tom McCullough, Head of Track Engineering, explains more about the track in which they hope to do it: "The Yas Marina Circuit has three very different sectors. The first one is short with a medium and two higher speed corners, the middle sector is dominated by long straights and tight low speed corners, while the final sector is a relentless sequence of mainly low to medium speed corners. The nature of the track is typically hard on the brakes and rear tyres."

Meanwhile, Valtteri Bottas is hoping his team can emulate some of their previous success at the track, he says: "We are not expecting the track to be too severe on tyres, although because the ambient and track temperatures are quite high the tyres can degrade thermally quite a bit so we will need to manage that. I have good memories of the Yas Marina Circuit as this is where I drove a Formula One car for the first time in 2011 with Williams, and we had a strong result here last year as well which should prove useful for this weekend when setting the car up."

After finishing on the podium in India, another race that was quite warm, Romain Grosjean talks of the temperatures in Abu Dhabi: "It's certainly a contrast to the weather in Europe at the moment! The cockpit of a Formula 1 car can be a pretty hot place even when it's cold outside, but certainly Abu Dhabi is one of the hotter places we visit. It's very important that you take lots of fluids throughout the day – not just when you're in the car – as you can get dehydrated if you're not careful."

And one final quick word from team principal at Red Bull, Christian Horner. Immediately after winning the championship, he ominously said: "I think it's going to take quite a few days for this success to sink in and it's important for the Team to enjoy the moment but we will be pushing all the way to the chequered flag in Brazil."

Mr C: That was F1 Digest, a race preview show brought to you by Sidepodcast. Thanks go to Williams F1 and Red Bull Racing. If you are following the racing action over the weekend, visit sidepodcast.com for live comments, race results and lap by lap coverage of qualifying and the race.