



F1 Digest 2009 Season Preview – The Drivers

F1 is back!

Hello and welcome to F1 Digest. In just two short weeks, we'll be back in Australia, on the edge of our seats and ready to race. F1 Digest will be there to guide you through each race weekend. Four separate shows will preview the event, cover free practice, qualifying and the race, looking at all the action plus reactions from teams and fans alike. You won't have to miss a moment.

First, though, it's time for the F1 Digest 2009 Season Preview special. These four shows will cover everything you need to know going into the 2009 season. We'll be looking at the teams, the calendar, and the raft of regulation changes, but first, the drivers.

Class of 2009

Lewis Hamilton

Age: 24

Country: Britain

Debut: Australia 2007

Wins: 9

Hamilton polarises opinion both in and outside of the paddock, but there's no question he has a stunning talent. 2008 saw him succeed in the goal of winning the world championship, but he certainly made it difficult for himself. A proper racer, Lewis wants to win every race, every lap, every corner, and there are no compromises. It felt like it took him forever to win the championship, to get that monkey off his back, but in reality, he is entering only his third season in Formula 1.

There was real pressure on him for the past two years, so will being the defending champion make things any easier? The hopes of the team rest on his shoulders, and with the BBC ramping up coverage of F1 in the UK, chances are there will be more Britons crossing their fingers for him as well.

In winter testing, the McLaren hasn't looked strong. It's very possible they are hiding their true potential, but in F1, we have yet to see Lewis have a bad car underneath him. This could be his biggest challenge. In the last week or so, he's clouted a couple of barriers, so things are not off to a smooth start. As Ron Dennis says, though, it's when we get to Melbourne it really counts. We wondered how the dynamic within the team would work without Ron around, but it looks as though he will still be present to keep an eye on his young protégé.

Hamilton has every chance of winning the world championship again this year, defending his title and bringing the trophy back to McLaren. It rests on three key things: whether they can provide the car, whether he can cope when things don't go his way, and whether Heikki can provide any sort of backup whatsoever.

Heikki Kovalainen

Age: 27

Country: Finland

Debut: Australia 2007

Wins: 1



Let's face it, Heikki was disappointing last year. There's no glory in being the 100th GP winner when that victory is gifted to you on a plate. Even Kovi himself admitted that the win changed very little for him. The big problem the Finn faces right now, and in fact probably always has, is being in the shadow of another driver. Stepping into Alonso's shoes at Renault was never going to be easy, and reports suggest that his confidence was knocked considerably. Stepping into Alonso's shoes – yes, again – at McLaren was a smoother transition. Heikki seems to fit in with the McLaren work ethic very well, but when your team mate is Lewis Hamilton, what prospects do you really have?

In 2008, a lot of the poor performance excuses were down to adjusting to the car and fitting in with the team. There is no room for that this season. If he can't outperform his team mate, to do so seems unlikely, then Kovi needs to prove to the team that he can step up as a number two driver. He's been putting the hours in over the winter, beefing up his muscle mass so he can be stronger in the car. He's also been talking the talk recently, suggesting that if the car is fit to purpose then he will be fighting for wins and that will lead on to a championship campaign. Will the team let him though?

His winter testing performance is hard to judge, as the McLaren has spent a lot of time at the bottom of the timesheets. Heikki and de la Rosa have done a lot of the grunt work when it comes to fine tuning the aerodynamics, though, which may or may not give him a helping hand in 2009.

Kimi Raikkonen

Age: 29

Country: Finland

Debut: Australia 2001

Wins: 17

Clearly there was something wrong with Kimi and/or his car last year. When things were working in his favour, he could bang in the fastest laps with minimal effort. When things weren't going his way, there seemed to be no enthusiasm. However, interpreting that as a desire to retire may have been the wrong thing to do. Kimi says he is as motivated as ever, and perhaps the understated way of dealing with disappointment is just another of his quiet quirks.

No one expected Raikkonen to be shown up by Massa, but the F2008 swung in Felipe's direction, leaving the Finn floundering. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to suggest that if the same thing happens again this year, Kimi will be able to stop history repeating itself. Lots of fastest laps from the former World Champion, but very little else to show for a weekend's work? Kimi is adamant that he is moving on from last year, and in fact, it's almost worrying how little attention he's paying. While many drivers are learning and growing from their experiences, Kimi sounds as though he wants to brush the experience under the carpet, and just get on with what is still to come. It's a novel approach, and one that has served him well so far, but will it keep him going through another tough year?

Despite all the regulation changes, Ferrari featured towards the top of every test they attended. They also got a good strong week's running in Bahrain, whilst the European-bound teams were left in the rain. They are bound to be one of the constructor's to beat, so if he can get the enthusiasm up and the team behind him, Kimi will be in a good place.

Felipe Massa



Age: 27
Country: Brazil
Debut: Australia 2002
Wins: 11

I've already admitted we didn't expect to see Massa make the turnaround that he did. From a spin-a-lot laughing stock to a genuine championship contender, the progression was fascinating to watch and a spectacle to behold. As they say in almost all reality shows, he was the one who made the biggest journey throughout the season. Missing out on the championship by just that single point, in such a cruel fashion, can only have made Felipe stronger, although the way he handled it at the time proved that he already has a top sportsman mentality.

The chances are the disappointment will have made Massa even hungrier for a title, and his determination is going to be a fine act to try and balance. Pushing for points, podiums and wins is one thing, but it's easy to take it too far. Working with the team, and sharing the victories and disappointments with his mechanics was another sign of greatness from Massa in 2008, but if the Singapore-style pit stop mistakes keep happening, how long will it be before Felipe snaps?

Recent testing has shown Ferrari to have some decent speed, but there have been a few reliability issues, particularly around the KERS area. Massa's partnership with Smedley can see him to the top, but if the car isn't underneath him, then he will no doubt start questioning his loyalty. However, Massa fits within the Ferrari team like a glove, and his influence can only grow as the results begin to stack up.

Robert Kubica

Age: 24
Country: Poland
Debut: Hungary 2006
Wins: 1

Kubica was always the quiet one. Even when he was in with a shout at the title, he was the one not talking up his chances, but playing the smart - and quiet - game. However, from the sounds of it he was more vocal within the team, and when they turned their attentions to 2009, he fought back. It came to nothing, of course, and Robert had to settle with the one win for the season.

This leads to the inevitable question - is it possible to deviate from the plan instigated by Mario Theissen? The step by step, take it slow, one year at a time format has worked for BMW so far, and if that is the case, then a championship is within their grasp. Can Kubica be the one to grab it? As long as he keeps the team on side, the chances are he can make the most of the car under him.

The win in Canada was lucky, but to have brought about a successful tick on the Theissen to-do list must make Kubica a pretty special part of the team. However, I suspect there is a small part of the Pole that seethes over the breakdown of his 2008 championship campaign, and there is going to have to be a bit more give and take in the future. Although it doesn't seem like it, there is pressure on Robert. He has the team's expectations on his shoulders, and the weight of a country's hopes hanging around his neck, but he clearly handles it well. As one of those names tipped for the future, and entering his fourth year in F1, Kubica needs to capitalise on his position to take the next step.



Nick Heidfeld

Age: 31

Country: Germany

Debut: Australia 2000

Wins: 0

The frustration was clear for all to see when Kubica picked up BMW's first win, and left Nick on the shelf. Okay, it wasn't quite on the shelf, it was one of four second places the German achieved in 2008, but as seems to be the case with Heidfeld's career, it's so close and yet so far. He did suffer with tyre problems for a vast majority of the season, unable to make them work to achieve what he wanted. To his credit, Nick didn't let the problems get on top of him, and kept on pushing until the issue was resolved.

There's an element of this, though, that must have been desperation. Whilst Kubica was romping away with the team behind him – to an extent – Heidfeld was left racking up the second and third places, finishing every single race, and getting little of the credit. I can only imagine how frustrating it is to watch your teammate take glory when you can be just as fast, and even more consistent.

The problem is, being consistent doesn't get you anywhere. To keep your head down and finish every race is good for points, it's good for a number two driver. What Nick needs to do this year is start fighting, pushing the car to its limit, hustling for position. If there's an opportunity, we know Heidfeld can take it, but what we need to see now is Quick Nick creating the opportunities so he can live up to the name.

Fernando Alonso

Age: 27

Country: Spain

Debut: Australia 2001

Wins: 21

There's no place like Renault, Alonso must say, now he's back where he belongs. Last year was all about re-establishing himself within an environment where he feels comfortable, where the team is behind him, and he can dictate how the season goes. Of course, no one wants to be stuck in an underperforming car, but at least Fernando wasn't about to be shown up by his teammate. Far from it, in fact.

I think the two wins came at a perfect time for the Spaniard. Whether they were deserved or not, they showed that Renault were making progress, that they weren't destined to spend life at the back of the pack, and that his decision to return wasn't a mistake. Heading into a new year, everything is going to be mixed up, but at least Alonso has faith that the team can overcome the odds. In fact, this year, there's talk that Renault may have a slight engine advantage, so the odds are already overcome.

The one thing I want to see, assuming Renault can fight at the front in 2009, is how Alonso reacts getting mixed up in a championship battle. Before McLaren, way back in 2006, Alonso was fighting off Schumacher. In '07, it was all about the inter-team rivalries. Now, two years on, there is a raft of drivers ready to push for wins, and Alonso will have to be prepared to beat them all. There's no focusing on how to beat one specific person, hopefully, it will be close all the way through. It will be a fascinating year to watch.

Nelson Piquet

Age: 23



Country: Brazil
Debut: Australia 2008
Wins: 0

When Piquet found himself with an F1 race drive, he thought he'd made it. The pre-season interviews were all about how he was going to show the others how it was done. This isn't surprising from a guy who, although clearly can drive, made his way through the lower formulae in his own racing team. Bring on the 2008 season then, and how we laughed as Piquet gradually realised things weren't going to be as easy as he might have first thought.

At least now, 18 difficult races later, the arrogance is gone, and Nelson has been humbled enough to admit that he is still learning, that things can be difficult and that he is lucky to have kept his seat with the team. What of 2009 then? Over the winter tests, we were starting to get worried about Renault. Piquet was circling the various tracks and the times were low. Propping up the bottom of the timesheets, things were looking bleak. Piquet defended the times, suggesting that it wasn't clear who was running what, and he was sure the team would be fighting for wins. Then, Alonso got in the car and shot up the timesheets, showing that the team would indeed be fighting for wins. Oops.

It's not exactly a good start to the year to be outshone by your teammate in testing, but perhaps Piquet knows that is the way it's going to be. With the fiery Fernando as number one driver, there is little room for a fast, competitive, championship-capable driver in the second seat. Perhaps Piquet could just try and be fast, though.

Jarno Trulli
Age: 34
Country: Italy
Debut: Australia 1997
Wins: 1

For such an anonymous character on the grid, it surprises me how big a part Trulli can play in a race. It's not a high honour to have a phrase named after you, if that phrase is synonymous with a long, snaking line of slow cars, but Trulli doesn't seem to mind. The introduction of KERS may or may not solve the problem, which could leave Trulli rattling around the field by himself. Over the past few years, he has done little to grab headlines, but at the same time, he's not done anything completely awful either. No wins, but no dramatic failures. How very Toyota.

Trulli fits in with the clean cut team perfectly, and they are obviously working hard to try and get some more performance from the car. He's already talked up their chances of fighting with Ferrari for wins, suggesting that in the first few races he expects to be in the top three. Toyota have topped the times for a couple of days over the winter, but this is hardly a sign of a campaign to get to the top. Trulli says this is the best car that Toyota have given him though, so he needs to start making the glimpses of competitiveness we saw in 2008 a much more common occurrence.

To keep the parent company sweet, Toyota need to start winning, and if Toyota want to start winning, they need to get a bit more dynamism, a bit more excitement, and ultimately, a bit more speed.

Timo Glock
Age: 26
Country: Germany
Debut: Canada 2004
Wins: 0

It's not hard to shine in a team as bland as Toyota, and with a teammate as quiet as Trulli, but Glock has been working hard over the past couple of years to try and start putting his name on the map. The only problem is that although he had a good season in 2008, he's now more famous for his part in that last lap in Brazil, rather than the 25 points he picked up through the whole year.

Drivers don't often get a second chance in F1, but Glock has grabbed at his with both hands and proved that he deserved it. And his aim for 2009? Get back in front of Lewis. That may be pushing it, but there are some goals he can achieve. He needs to match Trulli in qualifying, which isn't going to be easy, given the Italians' gift for one-lap specials. He needs to get Toyota's first win, and he needs to bring the team onside to work with him. That second chance could easily be taken away again, especially if the team don't have a secure future.

Early indications in winter testing shows much improved consistency, with only a couple of mechanical problems, and the pace has picked up a little. It's a make or break season for both Glock and the team, and now is the time for him to make the transition from racking up the midfield finishes to starting from the front of the grid.

Sebastien Buemi

Age: 20

Country: Switzerland

Debut: Australia 2009

Wins: 0

Buemi is brand new to Formula 1 this year, and I can't decide whether this is good for him or not. On the one hand, he has little experience in the F1 car, and therefore the extensive rule changes won't be as disturbing to him as they may be to his rivals. On the other hand, he is starting from scratch, and that is a massive learning curve, and the extra KERS and flappy front wings to think about, just adding to the confusion. Perhaps this is something we will have to wait and see.

I know very little about Buemi, but he must have something about him as Toro Rosso snapped him up almost instantly, whilst they dithered about deciding on driver number two. Already, he has dismissed comparisons with Vettel, which is a good thing to do, a mantra he needs to maintain. Following in the footsteps of a massive season for the team is going to be tough and trying to live up to what Vettel achieved last year would make it almost impossible.

In winter testing so far, we've seen Buemi at the top of many a timesheet, in the old car. As soon as the STR4 was released, though, things started to go wrong. The late introduction of the car won't help, but for Buemi, it is simply a matter of working hard, learning everything he can, and bringing the team some results. F1 Racing Magazine don't seem too impressed with his chances at turning his hand to F1, suggesting: "he spent 2008 making the process of setting up a GP2 car for qualifying look more baffling than quantum mechanics."

Sebastien Bourdais

Age: 30

Country: France

Debut: Australia 2008

Wins: 0

Bourdais is going to be busy this year. His seat at Toro Rosso was announced so late that he'd already signed up to



compete in Le Mans 24 Hour, but perhaps the extra miles will help. With no testing this year, the drivers can benefit from any extra time behind the wheel, even if it is the wrong kind of car.

Last season saw it all go wrong as soon as the new car was introduced, so hopefully with with a couple of weeks to get used to the STR4 before the first Grand Prix gets underway, there is time for Le Seb to tweak the car to his liking. He was completely shown up by Vettel in 2008, but I don't think anyone expected otherwise. The results don't really represent the effort that was put in during the season, and adapting to the car was a lot harder than he'd anticipated. Even so, Bourdais really needs to ensure he is not outshone by Buemi this season. Rookie vs rookie is understandable, but to have been reinstated in the race seat only to be beaten by another rookie wouldn't do his career any good.

The man can drive, he has four Champ Car championships under his belt, and Toro Rosso's renewed faith in him may do his confidence the world of good. In terms of testing the new car, there has been very little chance for either of the drivers to get behind the wheel. Perhaps Bourdais' year under his belt will help him to adapt to the conditions quicker than his teammate. Perhaps not. I can't wait to find out.

Mark Webber

Age: 32

Country: Australia

Debut: Australia 2002

Wins: 0

Mark Webber's sole goal over the winter was to recover from a broken leg. Having sustained the injury in November, participating in the Tasmanian Challenge, Webber employed all manner of techniques to get himself well again. There was swimming, rowing at a simulated altitude, cryogenic therapies – minus 130 degrees C, the man is officially crazy. He tried anything that might help, and it all worked. He returned to testing exactly when he said it would, and the leg was strong enough to complete many race distances. He says walking is still a bit of a problem, but who needs to walk when you can drive an F1 car?

Of course, this year sees Webber against what could potentially be his biggest challenge yet – Vettel. Mark's already said the leg is not going to be an excuse for any bad performance, so that means the fight is on. From the crash-happy Coulthard, Webber now faces the young, talented, next-big-thing Vettel, and he needs to prove himself, if not simply keep up.

Performance of the Red Bull is hard to judge right now, but the chances are Vettel can wrangle every tenth of a second out of it that he can. Webber needs to be able to convert his impressive qualifying performances into race distance success. Whether that means getting to grips with the tyres, or learning how to manage traffic, or working with his strategy guys more closely, Webber needs to make it work.

Sebastian Vettel

Age: 21

Country: Germany

Debut: US 2007

Wins: 1

In 2008, Vettel was a breath of fresh air. When he was struggling with the car, he still came away from every race



bouncing with excitement, happy to have been out there having a go. Then he started winning, and blowing all our minds. Even if that Monza victory hadn't occurred, chances are he still would have made the step up to Red Bull to replace DC. It was a natural progression for a clearly talented driver.

Over the winter, Vettel has been putting in the hours, racking up the miles, covering for an absent Mark Webber. This will be a big boost for him, to have had the chance to get comfortable within the car and the team, and learn how things work. I wonder how much pressure there is on him. Obviously, he's not stepping into massive boots, after most of Coulthard's starts in 2008 ended in collisions, but his success may not translate to the new team.

One of the big question marks for this season is if Red Bull will allow their sister team to beat them again, but the more pertinent point is whether Toro Rosso would even be able to having lost one of their beloved Sebastians. Are Red Bull expecting Der Seb to bring great results with him? Will they be disappointed if he doesn't? I know I will be.

Nico Rosberg

Age: 23

Country: Germany

Debut: Bahrain 2006

Wins: 0

Rosberg is an incredible asset to Williams. He drives fast, he's supremely marketable, and he's loyal to the team. However, even Nico admits that his loyalty has been tested and this year is make or break for his position within the team. Loyalty can only get you so far, of course, and if you want to make it to the top, you need to be with the right team at the right time.

Last year, Nico stood on the podium twice, in all positions but the one he wanted – number 1. They were relatively lucky points hauls but Rosberg worked hard to get what he could out of a car that just wasn't as competitive as it should have been. He picked up a respectable amount of points, overshadowed his teammate, and finished the year in 13th.

For 2009, Williams have as much chance as anyone else to make that step from the midfield to the front, and this rests a lot on the car. Going with a different version of KERS to the entire rest of the field will set the team apart from the other competitors, and if this is the wrong decision, will Nico be able to control his frustration? He knows that staying with a slow Williams will see many of the doors that are open to him start to close. However, it would be brilliant to be in the team when they finally return to their former glory. It's a fine line to tread, and this year will see Rosberg decide where his future loyalties lie.

Kazuki Nakajima

Age: 24

Country: Japan

Debut: Brazil 2007

Wins: 0

I am constantly being told off for bringing up the fact that on his debut, Kaz knocked over a mechanic or two. Oops. But anyway, I can see that it is time to let that go, and the team moved on almost instantly, so I should as well. The problem is, there is very little else that stands out about the man. He seems like an awfully nice guy, and fits in the team nicely, but what else is there to say?



Brought on board as part of the Toyota Young Drivers programme, Nakajima was finding his feet last year, and learning the circuits as he went. He picked up nine points over the course of the season, which isn't spectacular, but then, neither was the car. Qualifying isn't a strong point for him, as Rosberg managed to get into the top ten seven times, whilst Kaz only made it out of quali 2 once. Working harder on getting single lap performance might improve his chances during the race.

Although Nakajima was involved in quite a few incidents, presumably due to his starting position at races, he only retired from two, giving props to the Williams reliability, and perhaps, his ability to overcome any problems and keep on going. The only other thing I can say is maybe his GP2 experience will help him adapt to slick tyres, but now I'm really clutching at straws.

Jenson Button

Age: 29

Country: Britain

Debut: Australia 2000

Wins: 1

This is the make or break season for Button. In his mind, the near miss with Honda's withdrawal has probably reset everything. Previously, 2009 was going to be the year when Honda finally got it all together and repaid Button for sticking with them. Chances are, he's just happy to have a race seat now, rather than fighting near the top of the grid. Personally, though, I think Button really needs to get some results this year. The Brawn car is looking a bit feisty at the moment, although it may be the team is just after some quick headlines. If it has any competitiveness at all, then Button needs to wrangle as much out of it as he can.

Although many of the problems keeping him out of the points over the last few years were more about the team than the driver, the time for excuses is over, and we want to see podium finishes. Where can his career go if he spends another season at the back of the grid?

The one thing working in his favour, as Button puts it himself, this entire debacle has been a wake-up call, and it's almost like a fresh start. With renewed vigour, Jense will no doubt be putting his all into the car. He's even fired up despite a hefty paycut, so clearly racing is at the top of his agenda.

Rubens Barrichello

Age: 35

Country: Brazil

Debut: South Africa 1993

Wins: 9

Hands up who thought it was all over for Barrichello? There we were, muttering about how unfair it was for a driver to slip out of the spotlight with none of the fanfare that Coulthard got. Thanks to Ross Brawn, Rubens gets another chance.

I'm not sure that he is particularly fast, but being in a beyond useless car for two years hasn't helped that impression of him. However, Ross has brought him back for the experience, and he is certainly very capable. He's the oldest man on the grid, turning 37 this year, and is the only active F1 driver to have driven with Ayrton Senna, so he has plenty of history to draw upon. Now that Ross Brawn is in full charge of the team, we think, Rubens may have a slight



advantage. The pair know each other particularly well from Ferrari, and Rubens will feel a strong sense of gratitude that he wasn't kicked out in favour of the other Senna. Even so, there is real camaraderie between Barrichello and Button, and for a team hauling themselves from the back of the grid and the brink of extinction, working together is going to be the key.

So, we know why Rubens is there, and we know he can drive a car, but can the team prosper after such difficult times? Testing would have you believe so, as Rubens led the final day in Barcelona, setting the fastest time of the entire four days. He says the car is good, but doesn't want to start thinking about the championship just yet. I suppose that would be a severe case of running before you can walk.

Adrian Sutil

Age: 26

Country: Germany

Debut: Australia 2007

Wins: 0

If all anyone remembers about Sutil's performance in 2008 is that heartbreaking Monaco retirement, then that is enough. To have that car up into fourth place was already an achievement, and to have that taken away without giving up completely was even more so. Sutil didn't let it get to him, he went on about his business, and kept his head down, racing in a sub-standard car for the remainder of the season.

From the looks of it, Sutil has the best car underneath him that he has ever had. He's one of those drivers that is touted as the next big thing, but being stuck at the back of the field is hampering his efforts to get noticed. The VJM02 has every possibility of moving up, at least getting to grips with the mid-field, if not becoming a regular feature of it. The continuity of drivers from 2008 into 2009 can only help with this, especially with the vast changes on the car, and within the structure of the team itself.

Sutil and Fisichella seem to make a good team, despite the relatively massive age gap between them - 10 years. Sutil needs to start making himself the dominant force though, and show that despite any technical difficulties, he can make the car work.

Giancarlo Fisichella

Age: 36

Country: Italy

Debut: Australia 1996

Wins: 3

Fisi is the second most experienced driver in the paddock, and let's be honest, he's clinging on to a drive in Formula 1. When he was ousted from Renault, we thought it was over, but he managed to slip into place at Force India, providing some much needed experience. Now that there's an eager Liuzzi waiting in the wings, supposedly guaranteed a race drive very soon, Giancarlo needs to prove he deserves to stay. With so little testing, there's not much time for him to impart his knowledge to the car, and try and help the development process. It's all about the racing.

2008 wasn't a great season for either Force India driver, but was particularly bad for Fisi. It was only the second year in his F1 career that he has finished with no points. You'd have to wonder whether the motivation can remain in



place, knowing your career is waning, you're stuck at the back, gathering no points. However, a racing driver lives to race, and if the car is even slightly better this season, Fisi needs to grab the chance to generate some headlines. As he quite openly states himself: "This is a very important season for me. Should I have a season like last year, then that would make it difficult to extend my career."

He's been testing hard since the new car was launched, which wasn't that long ago, to be fair, and the reliability appears to be pretty good. Now it's just a matter of converting that into results. I don't want to go through another season keeping my fingers crossed for them to get into Quali 2 every time.

So there we have it. The 2009 grid in all their glory. The only question that remains now is, what order will they line up in once we get going in Melbourne? In the next F1 Digest Season Preview Special we'll take a closer look at the teams, so I hope you will join me then. Thanks for listening.

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