



F1 Digest 2009 Season Preview – The Teams

Hello and welcome to the second episode of the F1 Digest 2009 Season Preview. The teams have been packing in the miles before the in-season testing ban comes into force, and we've had a good look at all the new cars, and how they compare with each other. Let's take a look at how they stack up.

The Teams

Force India F1

Team Principal: Vijay Mallya

Debut: Australia 2008

Championships: 0

We're starting at the wrong end of last year's championship finishing order, and that means Force India. We know this team has undergone massive changes through its evolution from Jordan to Midland to Spyker to Force India. You would think that some consistency would be the key, but the only major elements remaining in place for 2009 are Dr Vijay Mallya and the drivers, Fisichella and Sutil. Taking over the Team Principal role, Mallya booted out Mike Gascoyne and Colin Kolles almost immediately the season was over. Supposedly, Vijay prefers a more hands on approach, and there were rumours that the pair had differing ideas over the future of the car.

But has Mallya bitten off more than he can chew? The Force India has not only been redesigned on the outside to fit the new aerodynamic regulations, but the team have had to incorporate a brand new Mercedes engine and KERS device on the inside. This delayed the car's launch, meaning they've only had a week or so worth of testing. Thankfully, though, there don't seem to have been any major problems on the car, or in testing, and whilst they don't seem to be ready to get competitive, they are arguably not two seconds a lap behind anymore.

With the enforced wait for the car to hit the track, the team have worked quite hard on some sneaky little aero bits we might otherwise have not seen. The nose is quite high, and in being so, allows for a small turning vane below it – a loophole in the regs that Toyota have also spotted. The chassis seems to be completely different to its predecessor, which is hardly a surprise of course, but it is strikingly similar to the McLaren. The sidepods are highly detailed, and include exhaust escapes there, rather than at the back. The livery is much improved on last year, if only because there is no more gold. The nose features a lot more orange and green, and with the white base, the car is an homage to the Indian Flag.

Regarding KERS, the team haven't announced whether they will be running it in Melbourne or not yet. Presumably this will be a decision taken by McLaren first, and then Force India can adapt to the changes as necessary.

So, that's the car. What are the chances of the VJM02 being able to produce the results that Mallya wants to see? You would have to think not, although as previously mentioned, the team are reducing the gap to their competitors all the time.

Both drivers are desperate to start getting results, Fisi to keep his career going, and Sutil to open up some opportunities for himself. Their 2008 season was a bust, with no points at all, and just that fourth place in Monaco that was snatched away from them. What we need to see this year is a team that can easily get out of the first session of qualifying, and start making headway into the midfield. Dragging an F1 team up from the back of the grid can be a tough, long-term job, but now may be Mallya's best chance to make a step up, whilst the entire grid is a complete unknown.



Brawn GP

Team Principal: Ross Brawn

Debut: Australia 2009

Championships: 0

Although their debut is going to be in Australia this season, Brawn GP have a lot of development on their car already. Honda switched their attention to the 2009 season as early as they possibly could, probably to try and distract from the supremely awful results over the last two years. When they left in November, it looked like all the hard work was going to be wasted, but thankfully, Ross Brawn has picked up the pieces, in every sense of the word.

It was always going to fall to Brawn to turn around the fortunes of the team, but no one could have predicted it would happen to such a degree. Now, his influence on the team is about to become apparent. Brawn GP are actually in a very good position. They obviously want to do well, all teams do, and they need to attract sponsorship to secure the long-term future. But if they aren't as fast as hoped, there's an easy and understandable excuse in the troubled winter they've just experienced.

Recent testing, though, would point towards Button and Barrichello making leaps from last year's back marker performances. Their very first day out on track was impressive, and the times have continued dropping as testing continued. Of course there's speculation, and probably a certain amount of truth in the fact, that they are trying to generate headlines. But many around the paddock believe that Brawn GP are offering up some significant competition, and they are a team to watch when Australia rolls around.

Watching them isn't exactly a comfortable experience, as the stark white car is only accented with a black stripe, and that fluorescent yellow stripe. The livery does stand out for being retro, but it certainly isn't an appealing look. However Ross admits it's simply a starting point, representing the early stages of the team's beginnings. What's under the paint is more important, and the car does look the product of some very late nights of work. The front suspension is well designed, with the nose as low as is possible to go. The diffuser is unique, and we've got small sidepods but the normal, large rear wing. Part of the reason for the well sculpted car, and the fast pace, is that Brawn GP are unlikely to be running KERS. Honda did a lot of development work on their device, but given the chaos over the winter, postponing and possibly even cancelling the introduction of KERS for 2009 is probably a good idea.

Both drivers are excited for the new season, and Button has already suggested that the scare of possibly losing his drive has made this year a new start. He's psyched up to get racing, and this added motivation will help enormously. Barrichello has plenty of history with Ross Brawn, so the pair will be able to work together throughout the year to keep on improving. Last year was pretty grim for Honda, this year it's a whole new team on almost every level.

AT&T Williams F1

Team Principal: Frank Williams/Patrick Head

Debut: Argentina 1978

Championships: 9

When Williams released their 2009 car, the FW31, all attention was on the livery. The interim testing livery was a nice dark blue that looked sleek and made the stark wing changes a little bit more palatable. Unfortunately, this wasn't the livery that is set to make its debut in Australia, and we have been confronted with a much lighter blue and white affair instead.

When the official livery was released, we were distracted somewhat by the introduction of two aero pieces, dubbed "skate fins" sticking up either side of the cockpit. These were quickly condemned by Charlie Whiting and the team won't run them, but it's another design that is pushing the limits of the regulations. Both Williams and Toyota have



come under fire for their radical rear diffuser designs, with Max Mosley defending them simply by saying they are a clever interpretation of the rules. There are still complaints though, and this issue could run and run.

There's plenty of development on the car that is legal though, including a front wing about as sculpted as you can get. On the inside, the team have chosen to go with a flywheel based KERS system, whilst the other teams have invested in battery devices. Although supposed to be far ahead in their development of the energy recovery system, the fact that they're using a different system sets them apart from the rest – and we don't yet know if that's in a good or bad way. We also don't know whether they'll be bringing the device in for the first race, or whether it will need to wait for a future Grand Prix.

So far in testing, Williams have remained relatively low key, although they did stay on at the extra test in Jerez until the bitter end. Both Nico and Kazuki have been putting the miles in, and there have been no major catastrophes. As mentioned in the F1 Digest drivers preview, this is a key year for both the team and for Nico. He needs to get some results to stay loyal to the team, and Williams themselves need to get some results to attract some more sponsorship. With the financial troubles, RBS and Icelandic group Baugur have both pulled out, and it's time to tempt in some new industries. Frank Williams isn't overly worried about the future though, but admits it's a constant battle.

Frank Williams: "We've carried forward a lot of sponsorships that were due to expire last year for two further years. Being with us, like Accenture, for 17 or 18 years now, so we already have enough, we know we have enough money with which to go racing, and as always, as any good Grand Prix team would do, we are planning, and looking, and thinking and talking about our deals that we need to secure for 2011 and 12."

Red Bull Racing

Team Principal: Christian Horner

Debut: Australia 2005

Championships: 0

With Adrian Newey on board, we're expecting great things from Red Bull this year. When the new car was unveiled – much later than some of the front running teams – it was clear that a lot of work had gone into the new RB5. We've speculated that the front and rear wing, in particular, are very retro, and Newey appears to be using that to his full advantage, by going back to some fundamental principles from F1 past.

The front wing has only a small flap to be adjusted up and down as per the moveable wing regulations. The rest of the wing is moulded carefully to create good airflow. The nose is high and supremely long, and it flows back up to the cockpit smoothly. The RB5's sidepods are small, and unlike the other cars, they flare out at the bottom, rather than cutting underneath. The cooling outlets are placed elsewhere nearer to the exhaust.

They're picking up Renault's KERS system, which will save on some development time, and presumably they benefit from the upgraded Renault engine as well – more on that later. Testing has been pretty quiet for the team, with Vettel putting in a lot of miles over the winter while Webber spent time in recovery. He packed in the race distances when he returned, though, which not only showed that the Australians broken leg shouldn't be a problem, but that any reliability gremlins are being held at bay at the moment as well. Vettel led the day for one of the days of testing, but himself said that you have to keep your feet on the ground when it comes to pre-season times.

Sebastian Vettel: "This time is very useful and extremely important to develop the car and develop our driving skills, improve our driving skills. Because it's the only time it doesn't really count, so you can experiment and try new and different things. Of course, sometimes if you have a problem being super cautious with the new car because you



don't want to risk any bigger damage, and sometimes it's a bit boring if you have to wait, but there's always something to do.

Scuderia Toro Rosso

Team Principal: Franz Tost

Debut: Bahrain 2006

Championships: 0

When the STR4 was launched, team principal Franz Tost made a point of saying it wasn't just a rebadged RB5. Well, it certainly looks like one. Even the livery is gonna make things confusing when they get out on track together. The team are trying to distance themselves from Red Bull and they will be bumping up the design team throughout the year to try and take on the role from Adrian Newey. A mighty task! As Bourdais says, though, working with Red Bull, for now, is a help.

Sebastien Bourdais: "I think the advantage is that obviously we will have a bit of a closer relationship with Red Bull technology, and maybe we can hopefully improve with all the cars and try to share the work because the evolution in the season is going to be quite high, obviously and the more data you have the better it is, and maybe we can use the resources and turn it to our advantage."

The Toro Rosso 2009 car features the same structure as the Red Bull, with length, wheelbase and weight distribution identical. However, as they feature a different engine – a Ferrari, no less – there are bound to be some different systems involved.

The team haven't yet decided on when the debut of their KERS device will be, just like most of the other teams. Giorgio Ascanelli has essentially ruled it out for Melbourne, and presents China as a potential option. The car didn't have an easy start to life, either, as on its first full day round Barcelona, they completed only 20 laps. The team had to sit out most of the day waiting for new parts to arrive from the factory due to a show-stopping problem with the front suspension. Things appeared to improve once the parts arrived, but this is not a good start.

With just a week's worth of testing under their belts, minus one day, it's going to be tough for the team, and they are pragmatic about their chances. Tost admits that with Vettel leaving, repeating their success from last year is going to be almost impossible, but that there's no telling which teams are where performance wise. Buemi is also somewhat wary of stepping into Vettel's shoes.

Sebastien Buemi: "To come after Vettel, I mean, is quite a bit more pressure maybe because, for sure he did a really good job but I'm quite thankful to him because he improved the team and for me it's going to be, maybe a bit easier to get there. For sure there will be comparison all over the season but this is the way it is, this is Formula 1 and I will just concentrate on myself, try to give my best and we'll look at it again at the end of the season."

Panasonic Toyota Racing

Team Principal: Tadashi Yamashina

Debut: Australia 2002

Championships: 0

Toyota had one of the most interesting launches of the year, with everything taking place online. A movie style trailer was released, plenty of videos and pictures, and lots to take in. Unfortunately, the same can't be said about the car, as the livery is once again, disappointingly, red and white. Their rear diffuser caused a stir though, with a similar take on the rules as Williams. At the front, the nose is pretty slim but very high and short, allowing for plenty of airflow underneath the car.



Toyota have admitted that as soon as Honda left, their F1 future looked in doubt, but Yamashina lobbied hard for them to remain in the sport. Their budgets have been slashed enormously, at the same time expectations have been raised. The team need to get their first win this year, otherwise the lack of results will not impress the board. Glock has already said the car feels better – mostly because of the slick tyres, but also because it is a step up from last year. In testing, the results would seem to point to that, with Glock heading up quite a few of the days. The team covered plenty of laps and got a lot of good information back. They were pretty consistent and had relatively good reliability, which sounds about right for Toyota. Now it's just a matter of making the step up to podium finishes. Toyota Motorsport president John Howett knows it's a big challenge, though.

John Howett: "The new aero package is a big challenge for everybody, I believe because it resets the benchmark position of zero for everybody. It perhaps helps us when we're not playing catch-up all the time. The worrying thing at the moment is we don't know where anybody is, so we think we've worked very hard during the winter, we think we have a very, very good package, but you know, one is of course very nervous because we have no idea."

Trulli says he is full of hope for the new season, also suggesting the car feels very good underneath him, and his confidence is sky high thanks to testing. He and Glock get on very well too, as the German tells us here:

Timo Glock: "Jarno is a really, a really strong driver especially in qualifying and this year I learnt quite a lot from him especially in the first part of the season. I think in the second part of the season we worked very well together, developed the car in the right direction, and so far, we've enjoyed working quite a lot and had a lot of fun."

ING Renault

Team Principal: Flavio Briatore

Debut: Britain 1977

Championships: 2

2008 could easily have been a washout for Renault, but Singapore turned things around for them. Their performance improved gradually over the season, well, Alonso's did, until they got to the position of winning not one, but two races. Now, Singapore was pretty lucky, but in Japan, he had enough power to overshadow the others. The question is, therefore, why were the team given special dispensation to make changes to their engine. Breaking the big freeze, the FIA allowed Renault to upgrade certain elements, which was agreed by the other teams. Surely they can't have been that far behind and still winning?

It won't be clear if they have any sort of advantage until we go racing. In testing so far, Alonso has clocked up some strong times, whilst Piquet has been a bit more disappointing. The car has caused it's fair share of red flags along the way, as well, with Alonso crashing out on the first day of the final Jerez test.

Of course, we were barely paying attention to the speed of the car, so distracted were we by the livery. Gone is the strip of blue from 2008, and in its place more and more of the ING orange lion. The Elf branding has been replaced by Total – same company, different colour. We've now got red on the car to contend with as well. Personally, I think it looks better than the blue of last year, but it is still a busy mess.

Unfortunately, the shape of the car doesn't do anything to help the situation, with the Renault featuring a really fat, bulky nose. Bringing the nose out to maximum width allows for the design to have increased downforce. It also allows us to poke fun quite a lot. The sidepods have extra air intakes to allow cooling for their KERS device. Their rear diffuser is pretty standard, altered slightly, but nothing compared to the Toyota and Williams. Flavio Briatore has been very vocal about his dissatisfaction with their take on the rear of the car, and chances are we haven't heard the last of it yet.



Talking of Briatore, his commitment to F1 has seemed shaky over the last year or so. He's spoken out about intending to leave within the next few seasons, and we know he has interests outside of Formula 1. Likewise Renault may not be as enamoured with the sport as they once were. It will only take a little success for them to be assuaged but if the results aren't forthcoming, the financial difficulties might bring Renault's entry to the sport into question once again.

If there's anyone who can get them the results they need, it's Alonso. He and the team get on together and work well, whilst Piquet can act as a backup, sort of. A return to their '05 and '06 ways is unlikely, but the chances are we will see Renault moving up the field earlier in the year than in 2008.

BMW Sauber

Team Principal: Mario Theissen

Debut: Bahrain 2006

Championships: 0

BMW were the ones who scared us rigid when their first iteration of a 2009 car hit the tracks late last year. We crossed our fingers and hoped that things might change by the time the cars were launched. And things did change a little, but BMW? They remained the same. The front wing on that car is like lego, particularly boxy and very simple. There's nothing to say that is a bad thing, except the looks.

The car is going to need to be a good one, as Kubica was forced to sacrifice his championship campaign in favour of it. The BMW was one of the first to run their KERS, and even though theirs must be the most developed system, they're still not positive it will be introduced in Australia. However, Mario Theissen is convinced that KERS is the future:

Mario Theissen: "BMW has always supported KERS for two reasons mainly. Firstly, KERS is what is needed in future, in future road car technology, and BMW has always seen our Formula 1 programme as a technology lab, a high-speed technology lab. We want to use technology which is developed in Formula 1 for road cars, we want to use Formula 1 as a true technology pioneer. The second reason is KERS will allow us to reposition the image of Formula 1, so it's not just good for BMW, it's very good, and exciting chance for Formula 1 as a whole."

Both front and rear suspensions are new to accommodate the slick tyres, and that was a big priority for the team during testing. This has also altered some of the chassis elements that house things like the gearbox, the engine, and the new KERS device, although those in themselves remain similar to last year – minus KERS, obviously. The sidepods bring the car out wide, and then cut back in around the air outlets.

Considering how early they were testing the 2009 specifications, BMW haven't particularly shone in testing so far. They've been staying true to form and putting in the consistent, reliable laps without too much trouble. Heidfeld did top the times one day in Barcelona, and the German has been talking up the team's chances of competing for the title this year. He's happy with the car, although said it did take a while to get used to it. Here he is talking at the launch:

Nick Heidfeld: "Well, I think this is the biggest rule changes we have had in a long time. Hopefully the target to reduce costs and even more to make racing more fun with more overtaking will work out, but we will only see in the future, if the slicks and the reduced aerodynamics will just do that. We are just presenting our new car here, so let's see how it feels."



For 2009, the goal is to fight for the title. Team Principal Mario Theissen has a steady, measured approach to things that has seen the team focus on the long game. With the “win a single race” objective completed, now it’s time to focus on the season as a whole. No doubt this will make things more harmonious within the team, because no driver wants to give up on racing just because the goals have moved on.

Vodafone McLaren Mercedes

Team Principal: Martin Whitmarsh

Debut: Monaco 1966

Championships: 8

The pressure is on for McLaren this year. They need to adapt to the regulations faster than anyone else so they can retain Hamilton’s drivers title, and capture the much sought after constructor’s championship as well, and all of that without Ron Dennis. Well, that’s what we thought at first, but the more it comes down to it, the less of a step back he is taking.

It’s clear that Martin Whitmarsh has a much more hands on role than last year, and he’s stepped up to the plate nicely. However, there’s no fear that Ron is ready to completely let go just yet, and my guess is he’ll be on hand for advice and perhaps some Ronspeak whenever either is required.

The car looked good when it was first launched, and it was one of the more tasteful interpretations of the hideous regulations. The front looks a lot higher, which means the nose in turn has to drop more at the top. It’s well designed underneath to try and increase downforce, as well. Towards the rear, the exhausts are far back, and quite high up, but there don’t seem to be a large amount of other areas for hot air to escape.

The MP4-24 has been in development for 18 months, proving that it is possible to develop ahead and keep winning... if you have the budget. However, the headstart doesn’t seem to have helped. Testing hasn’t looked promising, with both Heikki and Lewis taking turns at the bottom of the timesheets. The only time they started leading was when just Williams remained as competition. However, Ron Dennis has corrected us, suggesting that testing is a discipline and it is not always about being the fastest man out on track.

This does make sense, but you would never have expected McLaren to be the slowest. Both Whitmarsh and Norbert Haug of Mercedes, have admitted the pace isn’t there but they are working on it. The worry for them must be the lack of in-season testing. Once they finish up in Jerez, it’s Fridays only until December.

Although some of the heat is off Lewis now he’s got that championship victory under his belt, he says he’s approaching the season just like any other. Heikki, meanwhile, has bucked the trend for dieting, and beefed up to be more aggressive inside the car. He’s also feeling much more confident within the team. With everyone feeling confident, the momentum is with them and things look good for the season ahead. It’s just the little niggle that those testing times may be pointing to something unhelpful, but we shall see.

Scuderia Ferrari Marlboro

Team Principal: Stefano Domenicali

Debut: Monaco 1950

Championships: 16

Ferrari are last on our list, but were the first to release their 2009 car into the wild. The launch was particularly low-key, and the F60 simply headed out on to the track at Mugello, looking eerily similar to the 2008 car. Although the wings and reduced aero changes are visible to see, a lot of the main elements of the car have been evolved from last season.



It's a little shorter than the previous car, and can no longer run the holey nose that we had so much fun with last year. The wing mirrors have been designed to help extend the front of the sidepods, but it does make you wonder if the driver will be able to see at all. The team are also running a new braking system, which presumably embraces their KERS device more effectively. Ferrari seemed to take a long time to get going with their KERS work over the winter, but made some big strides forward during the dusty weeks in Bahrain. Now they appear to be relatively satisfied with what they've got, although there's no confirmation on when they'll be introducing it to the car.

Testing has been pretty good for the Scuderia, with their times normally somewhere near the top – albeit scuppered by the pace of the Brawn during the closing stages of the off-season. Stefano Domenicali assures us that the pace of the Ferrari is good, and he's happy with how the team are performing on the human side of things, and it's simply a matter of ensuring reliability. Given that last year's problems were mostly human error from all walks of life in the team, this seems like a good place to be.

One person won't be joining them anymore, though, and that's Jean Todt. Although he stepped aside from the team principal role, handing it to the very capable Stefano, Todt has now ceased all roles within Ferrari and left. It's unlikely this will affect the team at all, and in fact, may give them more of a chance to grow, without the beady eye of Jean on them.

In terms of the other important personnel, the team need to find a way to motivate Kimi even when the car isn't working to his liking. Of course, making a car that does work to his liking takes priority, but if we can get those many fastest lap results on every lap, things will be very different for the Finn this year. Massa simply needs to continue in the same vein as before, and the "working as a team" atmosphere that saw them win and lose together last year will have the exact same effect this time round.

Ferrari have lost the benefit of having Force India to run their engines, although they still supply Toro Rosso with motors. This will no doubt result in a significant chunk of data not present as they go through the season, but it might also mean they can concentrate on their own season and improve their own performance. The traffic light pit lane system looks set to make a comeback, so they'll need all the watchful eyes they can manage.

That covers all our teams and their potential for the coming season. It's just a few days away now, and we're all counting down the hours until the racing starts. We've got two more Digests before then, though, so stay tuned.