



Episode 37 – Japan GP

[Intro: Rich Reich, Keeping Up With the Race]

Chris: Welcome to Sidepodcast, Episode 37 – Japan GP. This weekend the Grand Prix returned to Fuji, but before we have a look at that, we should talk about some of the news from this week. Firstly, Matt Bishop, Editor-in-chief of F1 Racing is leaving to be McLaren’s head of PR.

Me: Good riddance... is a song that I like by Green Day, and represents no position of Sidepodcast, of course. But it’s probably best that he leaves, isn’t it?

Chris: Not a fan?

Me: I didn’t particularly like his attack on Ralf Schumacher in last month’s magazine, and this month’s magazine also seemed to have gone downhill, so I suggest it’s probably better off without him.

Chris: But really McLaren could do with good PR at the moment.

Me: Yea, it’s someone who knows the inside of the business, and they’ve obviously got their reasons for employing him. I hope he likes it down the back of the pit lane.

Chris: Max Mosley is another man who has been abusing his position. Recently talking about, we assume, Jackie Stewart, and his criticism of the \$100 million fine, Max said: “There’s one particular ex-driver, who because he never stops talking, never has the chance to listen, he goes around dressed up as a 1930s music hall man, he’s a certified half wit.”

Me: We do have a picture of a 1930s music man, don’t we? Shall we put it on the enhanced podcast. See if you can compare that look to the look of Jackie Stewart, tell us what you think. I’m not sure that Max is really in a position to criticise, do you? Is it any of his business?

Chris: I don’t know why he would be saying that. It just seems such a random thing.

Me: Yes, he’s obviously taken it as a personal insult and decided to use the media to get back at him, but I think he should probably show some respect to someone who’s actually achieved something in his life.

Chris: Okay, moving away from the politics, Super Aguri have got lots of lovely new sponsors. The main one is a company called Four Leaf who are a Japanese Health Food company. Never heard of them, but that’s good for them, they’ve finally got some money. And also, Spyker have officially been sold now. According to Autosport: “The deal has now been approved and only minor legal issues remain to be completed in the next 24 hours before the contracts are finally signed. And Mallya is expected to attend next week’s Chinese Grand Prix as team owner for the first time.”

Me: Wow, good stuff. Moving quickly then.

Chris: The Singapore track has now been decided.



Me: And what a track!

Chris: We'll put a picture on the enhanced podcast, but there will be 24 turns, it's 3.15 miles in length, 61 laps, and it goes over a 97 year old bridge, right across the Singapore river.

Me: It does look like it's going to be a hell of a circuit.

Chris: Not really F1 news, but Scott Speed had his first NASCAR test, and also Villeneuve finished 21st in his NASCAR debut. I'm not sure if that's any good or not because in NASCAR, you can never tell. 21st doesn't sound good, but it might be.

Me: Villeneuve has been impressing his boss, and the people paying the money. I think they've brought his Cup debut forward, so there's life in the old dog yet.

Chris: On Friday, the GPDA took their vote to decide on next year's board, and they wanted to get some fresh blood in, one of the younger drivers maybe, but they've decided to stick with who they've got – Alonso, Webber and Ralf. It's interesting because they're pretty much all people who's future is not necessarily secure.

Me: And of note, last year, they didn't decide who was going to be on the board until Michael Schumacher announced what his plans were.

Chris: They delayed the vote.

Me: So you'd have to assume from this vote that both Ralf and Alonso intend to be in Formula 1 in 2008.

Chris: Talking of driver safety, do you remember in Australia where David Coulthard almost took off Wurz's head?

Me: I certainly do.

Chris: They were campaigning to get the cockpit sides raised, and they've been successful in their campaigns. The FIA are going to look into that.

Me: And they're going to do that for next year?

Chris: 2008.

Me: And no one really knows exactly what's going to happen, but presumably cockpit sides will be raised by a certain amount which should protect the drivers head should a wheel come flying across, across from one side.

Chris: That's enough news for now, let's move on to what happened in the race weekend.

[Sweeper]

Chris: In Free Practice 1, both Yamamoto and Vettel stopped on the track, although Vettel managed to continue the session. Toyota's were running front wheel bins like Ferrari.

Me: They have, and they've done really well to get that research and development done before the end of the year, because Ferrari only debuted those midway through the season at a Paul Ricard test, and they've managed to copy that design and get it up and running before the year's out, so very good work from those guys.



Chris: The McLaren's were trading fastest laps towards the end of the session, and Sutil managed to leap into 5th right at the end. The fastest three were Raikkonen, Massa and Alonso. After Free Practice 1, a number of drivers complained to Charlie Whiting, about the pit entrance.

Me: Not again.

Chris: Because the speed limit isn't until a little way down the entrance, and they thought it might be a bit dangerous.

Me: Wimps.

Chris: The second race in a row where they don't like the pit lane.

Me: It is, isn't it? They didn't like it in Belgium and the FIA did nothing about it, and they don't like it here and the FIA have done nothing about it. They do nothing but complain those drivers.

Chris: This time the McLaren's were going fastest, although the Renault's pipped them at one point during the session. It was much busier than Free Practice 1 because everyone was running longer stints to check out how the tyres would be. Sutil held onto 7th place for at least half of the session but he was eventually bumped down to the bottom ranks by the end. Yamamoto went off track and was nudged by Barrichello as he came back in. It looked like the Spyker was fine but when he got to the pit box, his nose just fell off. The fastest three were Hamilton, Alonso and Massa. Free Practice 3, Saturday morning, the weather was pretty bad, plenty of fog. The medical helicopter couldn't take off and that's a bit of a problem because the nearest hospital is miles and miles away. At first the session was delayed by 15 minutes, then another 15 minutes. The cars did get to go out but only for 4 minutes before the session was red flagged. After trying to restart the session a few more times, they eventually gave up. The fastest three drivers were Wurz, Rosberg, and Trulli, but it doesn't really count for anything, because they were, in fact, the only three drivers who got to do a flying lap.

[Sweeper]

Chris: With the weather still hanging over the track, there was plenty of doubt about whether qualifying would take place at all. Ted was saying "We've just had word what happens if the qualifying sessions don't take place today," but before he got to tell us what would happen, the cars went out and the session started. So, it's good to know that everyone knew what was going on.

Me: It is slightly odd that they decided to start the session even though the helicopter couldn't fly, given that they'd already stopped Free Practice for the very same reason. I guess they decided that the television money and the viewers were more important than safety, in this case.

Chris: Ralf and Vettel both spun but carried on. During their pit stops, Sato and both Renaults changed to intermediate tyres, whilst the majority of people remained on wet tyres. Although, having said that, James Allen was trying very hard to confuse us by saying that they're not called intermediate tyres anymore, they're wet tyres, and the wet tyres are actually extreme wets. And at that point I stopped listening.

Me: What's in a name, eh?

Chris: Alonso set a time which was second fastest, and he retired to the garage, he was pretty satisfied with that. Hamilton was doing his fastest lap and he got blocked, so he was in 18th and only had one more chance to set a time.



Of course he managed to get 4th fastest, so it wasn't ever really going to be a problem. Ralf and Yamamoto crashed. The fastest three were Massa, Alonso, and Raikkonen, and dropping out Barrichello, Wurz, Davidson, Sutil, Sato, and Yamamoto. In Quali 2 we followed an entire lap by Trulli, he is in a Japanese team of course. Raikkonen worried us a bit by going slowly but he was just clearing some space for his flying lap. Button was up to 5th, he is very good in the wet. Both McLaren's set their times, then Alonso went back in the garage, whilst Hamilton stayed out to either defend his time or get some practice in.

Me: There was a lot of that going on, actually. Fill the cars up with a whole load of fuel, and send them out for several laps, just to see what they could do. Slightly unusual in the first two session of qualifying, certainly this year.

Chris: The fastest three were Hamilton, Alonso, and Raikkonen, and dropping out were Fisichella, Kovalainen, Coulthard, Trulli, Liuzzi and Schumacher. Hamilton was at the head of the queue for the third session, followed by Vettel, then Alonso, who very quickly got past the Toro Rosso. Raikkonen was struggling with his Ferrari a little bit, he went wide a couple of times, but no harm done. Hamilton came into the pits quite early, Alonso came in with 4 minutes to go. Massa was doing a fast lap, and he got stuck behind Heidfeld so he had to abandon it and back off for some room. Interestingly, it's the first time Toro Rosso have been in the third session of qualifying. The final grid positions were Hamilton, Alonso, Raikkonen, Massa, Heidfeld, Rosberg, Button, Webber, Vettel and Kubica. But Rosberg had an engine change and so he was demoted to start in 16th.

[Sweeper]

Chris: On Sunday, it was still very, very wet. The chances were pretty high of having to start the race behind the safety car. The most important corner of the championship, Hamilton vs. Alonso, and they go and ruin it by starting behind a safety car.

Me: Yea, rubbish.

Chris: We've been saying the only thing anyone really knew for certain about the track was that it had a stunning backdrop, Mount Fuji, but apparently it was only visible for about an hour on Friday morning, and we didn't see it on TV at all.

Me: No, couldn't tell you where it was, couldn't tell you what it looked like. Apparently, there wasn't much snow on it this year, either.

Chris: There wasn't a grid walk, but we did notice that the drivers were walking boots on over their racing boots, to keep their little toes dry. Massa actually went so far as to stand in his boot bag, very odd. When they got going, they were behind the safety car. Liuzzi started from the pit lane.

Me: He qualified on a dry setup – bit of a risk – on Saturday, in the hope that Sunday would be dry, and it didn't happen, so they had to start him in the pit lane where they could change his downforce settings.

Chris: Massa went off track, lost a place, and regained it again, and he had to pit to change tyres. It turns out that Charlie Whiting told all the teams to start on extreme wets, and both Ferrari's didn't, so it wasn't long before Kimi had to come in and change his tyres as well. This put both Ferrari's to the back of the pack, and Ferrari claim that they weren't told about the tyre thing, even though every other team knew about it and all the ITV people knew about it and everything.

Me: Yes, a likely story, we may say.



Chris: While they were behind the safety car, Raikkonen went off, Trulli had a bit of a spin, people were on the radio complaining that the conditions were crazy. Davidson told his team that he really didn't think it was safe, he couldn't see the lights of the car in front. He was told to just hang in there and trust the race directors.

Me: What are they paying these people for? They're all a bunch of wimps, bit of rain, they don't like getting their little suits wet.

Chris: Don't be mean.

Me: Jesus, they're useless, all of them.

Chris: Lapped cars were allowed to unlap themselves, which actually was just Liuzzi, and they seemed to be using him as a bit of a guinea pig, in that it all depended on how well he got round the track as to whether the safety car came in or not. He seemed to get up some good speed and kept to the track. Other people were struggling though, Heidfeld spun which dropped him to tenth, and Button got tangled up in that, lost his front wing and a couple of places. He carried on though, with no front wing and a big hole in his nose.

Me: Says a lot about their aero configuration at the moment, doesn't it? You take the wing and the car doesn't seem to be affected at all.

Chris: Heidfeld's post-race press release said that his radio wasn't working. The decision for the safety car to come in came halfway round the lap, so he didn't get a chance to be told along the pit wall. He couldn't see the safety car once it switched its lights off, he didn't know whether it had disappeared into the distance or gone in, so he was in the wrong gear on the straight, and everyone swarmed past him.

Me: That's a bit mean, isn't it?

Chris: Not fair.

Me: You can completely see how that happened, it just goes to show that F1 cars should be tested in the wet more. During testing, every time it's rained, all the cars have immediately dived in the pits, so they've had no wet running at all, and the electronics are clearly suffering under this kind of condition.

Chris: So the safety car finally came in on I think it was lap 19. Hamilton was seriously backing everyone up, it was a bit crazy. Wurz lost it under braking into Turn 1 and he sideswiped Massa and went off the track. Wurz retired but Massa continued. He then had a drive through penalty for overtaking under the safety car and when he came out of the pits, he went straight on at the corner, almost as if it wasn't there. Somehow Sutil was up to 10th, Sato was driving round with damage to his front wing, not quite sure how that happened. Even Sato isn't sure who bumped into him.

Me: That's how bad the visibility was, is it? I can't tell what rear wing that was, but I definitely hit something.

Chris: Yes, but he came into the pits to change his nose. They topped him up with fuel and on the way out, he caught fire. Thankfully, the rain put him out and I'm not sure he even noticed. Although he was complaining of being freezing cold in the cockpit, stuck behind the safety car, so it might have warmed him up a bit. Button eventually had to pit for a new nose which effectively ruined his race. Raikkonen had overtaken about 9 cars, and was up to 12th, he overtook Ralf really easily. Alonso came in to the pits, took on a ton of fuel and came out into traffic. Hamilton came into the pits, took on a ton of fuel and came out ahead of all the traffic, ugh.



Me: Just goes to show how important qualifying is these days, because had the roles been reversed, Alonso would have come out in the clear air.

Chris: This meant that Vettel was leading the race with Webber second. Alonso spun but regained the track, and Massa did the same, missed the corner, again. The road went right and he went left. Vettel came into the pits which put Webber leading the race. Heidfeld overtook Alonso which was a little bit concerning, but then Heidfeld came into the pits soon after. Kubica bashed into Hamilton, and they lost a couple of places. Vettel and Coulthard both overtook him. Webber came into the pits and rejoined behind Hamilton, so now Kovalainen was leading the race. Raikkonen got ahead of Alonso, but the McLaren had a ton of damage to the side of his car. They kept on showing the same shot over and over again of this bit wobbling in the air. Kovalainen and Coulthard pitted which put Fisichella in the lead of the race. How many leaders can you have in one race? Raikkonen had to pit, Yamamoto had a spin, and Fisichella came into the pits, so finally order was restored and Hamilton was leading the race again. Alonso hit the wall.

Me: Big, big accident.

Chris: There was debris all over the track, and the safety car had to come out. Hamilton started backing everyone up again, generally causing havoc. Vettel collided with Webber which put them both out of the race. Webber was a little bit annoyed, shall we say? Louise Goodman went to talk to him and he swore just a little bit.

Me: Just a little bit.

Chris: Afterwards Vettel said: "Lewis was going really slowly, I don't know why, I thought he had a problem. As I looked back towards Mark, I was already in the back of his car. I think he also had to react to Lewis ." It was difficult to find a quote from Webber without the F word in it, but he said: "We were in very good shape to challenge Lewis for 1st today, Vettel was a bit wild behind me during the first safety car period, and did a very good job of hitting me during the second." So at this point, Hamilton leads, Kovalainen is second and Massa is third, despite having stopped three times.

Me: And despite being plum last at one point.

Chris: Rosberg spun off, he had an electronic failure caused by the conditions, so he slowly crawled back to the pits. Both Schumacher and Davidson retired. Davidson was taken out by throttle sensor failure and Schumacher had water in his electrics which took out his radio, and then he had a puncture. You know, they did teach us in school that water and electricity don't mix.

Me: Yes, again, more testing in the rain.

Chris: Raikkonen overtook Coulthard, all the way round the outside, just appeared out of nowhere. He went wide a couple of times after that but it didn't seem to hurt him at all. So all that stood between Raikkonen and a podium place was Massa. Of course, Massa then had to pit for new tyres and fuel.

Me: Don't be so cynical to say that was deliberate.

Chris: Well, he'd already pitted three times, and there was only a few laps to go.

Me: Oh, well, maybe it was then. They had to get him out the way somehow, didn't they? No team orders, remember.



Chris: Having said that, a few people did have to pit at this late stage in the race. They had taken on fuel under the original safety car, hoping it would get them to the end of the race. But presumably, they gambled on the safety car staying out longer than it actually did, and them being able to save fuel, and it didn't work. Heidfeld slowed right down and stopped at the pit exit, a technical failure, but they're not sure what that is yet. Button also stopped on the last lap, and again we don't know what that is. The press release doesn't say.

Me: Which probably means he ran out of fuel, does it not?

Chris: Could be engine, could be water, could be fuel, who knows? Raikkonen wasn't about to give up on second place, he chased Kovalainen right to the end, but the Renault held him off. Massa was also showing what he was made by fighting for sixth place, all the way to the very last corner. They were both swerving, pushing each other off the track, and pulling out in front of each other. It was incredible but very dangerous.

[Sweeper]

Chris: The final points positions went to Hamilton, Kovalainen, Raikkonen, Coulthard, Fisichella, Massa, Kubica and Liuzzi. I was going to say it was a notable drive from Sutil who came in 9th after Liuzzi, but Liuzzi was given a 25 second penalty for overtaking Sutil under yellow flags, which bumped Sutil up to get his first ever championship point. Very good, however Toro Rosso are appealing Liuzzi's penalty. The drivers championship has Hamilton on 107 points, with Alonso on 95, Raikkonen on 90, Massa on 80, and Heidfeld on 56. The constructors has Ferrari on 170, BMW on 92, Renault on 51, Williams 28 and Red Bull 23.

[Sweeper]

Chris: Towards the end they were a bit worried that all the laps wouldn't get finished, because the two hours would be up. It was really close, there were like five laps to go and about 7 minutes, or something like that. I wouldn't have been impressed if there'd only been a couple of laps to go and they'd stopped.

Me: Would you not?

Chris: I know it's the rules, but you know, it's only two more laps, let them finish.

Me: Yea, I take your point, but there has to be a cut off at some point. But Bernie doesn't want the TV companies to overrun their schedule and ruin their programming for the rest of the day.

Chris: How can anyone be happy, knowing they stopped with just one lap to go? Although Jenson does that all the time.

Me: He's made a career out of doing that, hasn't he?

Chris: Vettel has been handed a ten place penalty for China, because of the incident with Webber, which is a real shame because he's been doing quite well.

Me: He looked a bit distraught, didn't he? Do you not think he's punished himself enough, regardless of any other sanctions that could be handed out?

Chris: It was a really bad showing from the Japanese teams. The Hondas were 10th and 11th. There was a Toyota in 13th, and a Super Aguri in 15th, the other two retired. Toyota powered Williams? Neither of them finished.



Apparently Toyota had a whole separate team dedicated to this weekend, from Japan, who were supposed to know the track better than the others.

Me: Well, they do own the track.

Chris: That didn't work, did it? The FIA have released a statement about the Ferrari complaints that they didn't know about the tyres. The statement said: "The 2007 sporting regulations state that in exceptional circumstances, stewards or race director may give instructions to competitors by means of special circulars in accordance with the code, and these circulars will be distributed to all competitors who must acknowledge receipt. But at a meeting of the Formula 1 Sporting Working Group, held in Monaco, December last year, all teams agreed to electronic distribution system, to ensure that all competitors received communications simultaneously with no time advantage to a team by virtue of their location in the pitlane." They say in the future all email correspondence will be backed up by written correspondence.

Me: Electronic communication, what happened to read receipts? Why do you need to back it up with paper? I mean, that statement just says to me, shut up and stop complaining.

Chris: Can't they just email back and say: "Yes, I've read this."

Me: Check, got it, tick. Good lord, in this day and age, where's my bit of paper? I think it's a bit of an insult, don't you, to watch a motor race running under a safety car for 19 laps?

Chris: It's a bit rubbish to get up at half past four in the morning.

Me: Incredibly boring. Either delay it, until such a time as the race can be run correctly, or don't run it at all, but don't run it at half speed, just wasting fuel and wasting time. It went on and on and on. It was fun watching Massa spin off occasionally, and watch Ferrari make a mockery of their strategy, but what a waste of our time, really.

Chris: I have better things to be doing, like sleeping.

Me: Sleeping would be good at that time in the morning. Disappointed in Alonso, wouldn't you say? You'd normally be able to put your house on him in the wet.

Chris: He was so good last time.

Me: Not very good at all, all over the place, it has to be said. Not in complete control of that car at any point in the wet, and I think Hamilton showed him the way. The TV cameras didn't pick up the beginning of the accident, but he said he basically aquaplaned straight into a wall, and just completely lost it. Which is not the Alonso we know, is it?

Chris: But you can't do much about aquaplaning. That comes with the elements.

Me: No, no one else did it though. And you wouldn't have expected Alonso to be the one to fall first. It blows a hole in his championship. On the bright side, the first time, in my recollection, two Finns on the podium, and the first time this year Renault on the podium, and the first time ever, Heikki on the podium.

Chris: And no Ron.

Me: No. Banned, sadly.



Chris: There's a quote from Wurz about the weather conditions. He said: "The only way I can describe it is if you close your eyes and run through the house at high speed. Then you might have some idea of how it was."

Me: Let's try that.

[Sound FX: Running, bang, Ow!]

[Sweeper]

Chris: Next week, the 7th October, is the Chinese Grand Prix, at the Shanghai International Circuit. The track is 3.390 miles long which will be 57 laps, and the previous three winners were Schumacher, Alonso, and Barrichello. I like it because it's very modern, I don't feel like I'm missing out on lots of history. But with the championship pretty much decided, it's going to be hard to keep enthusiasm up about the whole thing. Which actually brings me round to this week's talking point. Do you think the championship is decided already? Do you give up? Or do you hold on to any shred of hope, like, it's still mathematically possible that Raikkonen could win. It could happen.

Me: Under what circumstances?

Chris: I don't know, it could happen. Do you think the racing is still exciting even though the points don't matter? Like, today, we were saying they don't care about shoving Massa out of Raikkonen's way, even though he dropped right down to sixth, because they've got the constructors championship sewn up.

Me: Additionally what makes it really dull is all of the other positions are also pretty much decided. Only Red Bull and Williams are really contesting anything, and that's all the excitement we have for the next two races.

Chris: Red Bull and Williams. Excellent.

Me: Yea, absolutely, that's all there is.

Chris: Last week's talking point was about customer cars, whether they're good or bad, whether they should be counted as constructors or not. We had a good response over on Formula1.net, Stephen said: "I'm actually quite looking forward to seeing more customer cars. Sure, we lose the innovation which F1 should be all about, but how much enjoyment have we had from seeing an underdog like Toro Rosso or Super Aguri upstage Red Bull or Honda respectively? Being a successful Constructor is far more than car design alone, just take McLaren as an example, they will finish dead last this season despite a multi-million pound budget, dedicated design team and outsourced photocopying..." On our blog we had more comments on the FIA transparency than on customer cars, but that is all good, because we need the FIA to see we're not going to let them get away with anything. So that's it, it wasn't a particularly good race, I hope that China will be better.

Me: Yes, it's on slightly later, so hopefully, we'll be less tired, and hopefully there'll be lots and lots of racing laps, cars at high speed, less rain. Normally, you could bank on rain to make the race exciting. Sadly in this case, it made it less exciting.

Chris: There must be a happy medium, too much rain equals safety car, not good. Not enough rain equals boring, not good. There must be somewhere in between.

Me: And we really should say a final thank you to Bernie, for picking a racetrack under a mountain.

[Out: Rich Reich, Keeping Up With The Race]