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30th January 2005 - Past Times

While researching results to add into my website, I was browsing through copies of *Motor Sport* from the 1960s. What did catch my eye when doing this were the adverts – they are somewhat different from those of today.

Take these two adverts from the November 1963 edition of the magazine. Take a look at the hair of the lady on the left, and the blatant silhouetted outline of her breast. And the sequence of adverts shown below with the tagline *Worth looking at* – they may have been, but the dashboards also shown weren't. A case of more woman and less product – although the women are certainly more clothed than they would be today. They are a curious blend of the naïve and the overtly sexual, and possibly all the more attractive for that. A different era.....

WORTH LOOKING AT

The new Rover 2000 will give its owner a great time of motoring pleasure. ELECTRA (radio) is having well-ventilated in-earphone earphones, and ELECTRA (radio) is having well-ventilated in-earphone earphones on the dashboard and also made by SMITHS. The car's information they provide information rapidly to help driving and to proper maintenance. They are worth looking at.

SMITHS
a name with a world of meaning

WORTH LOOKING AT

The new Jaguar 3.4 XE will give its owner a great time of motoring pleasure. So will the new Jaguar 3.8 XE, which has 100 BHP. The car's information they provide information rapidly to help driving and to proper maintenance. They are worth looking at.

SMITHS
a name with a world of meaning

WORTH LOOKING AT

The Ford Consul is a car worth looking at. Ford's new heating and ventilation equipment is supplied by SMITHS. The dashboard instruments are also made by SMITHS. They make the car an efficient and safe, and the car's information they provide information rapidly to help driving and to proper maintenance. They are worth looking at.

SMITHS
a name with a world of meaning

SMITHS
INSTRUMENTS
CAR HEATERS
RADIO/PHONE
SPARK PLUGS
BLUESOL
PETROLEUM TUBING
THERMOSTATS
BATTERIES

SMITHS MOTOR ACCESSORY DIVISION - OXFORD ROAD, LONDON W12

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SMITHS MOTOR ACCESSORY DIVISION - OXFORD ROAD, LONDON W12

Contrast these early 1960s adverts with the one below, taken from the February 1970 edition of *Motor Sport*. The advert is much more blatantly sexual – the woman has even less to do with the car, is in a greater degree of undress and has two headlamps hanging off her, which could be suggesting what, I wonder?

At present, only an expensive handful of high-performance cars are equipped with Lucas New Q Halogen headlamps. The Jensen Interceptor is one. The Aston Martin DBS is another.

Now you can join the luxury league—at a fraction of the normal admission fee—by buying a Lucas New Q Halogen headlamp conversion kit.

Lucas New Q give you 30% more beampower. Whiter, brighter, rally-standard lights, to boost your night-driving range, with less eye-strain, more safety.

You can fit New Q yourself—all kits are complete with fitting instruction—or leave the job to your garage. (Hold on to your old lamps, by the way—you'll want to swap them back when you sell the car).

Join the brightest lightclub in town—
Lucas New Q.

Join an exclusive lightclub

New Q kits cost £11 for two-headlamp cars.
For four-headlamp systems, each pair of 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ " lamps (main beam kit and dipped beam kit) costs £7 10s. For full details, including fitting charges, call and see your local garage.

**Get 30% more beampower
with Lucas New Q Halogen
headlamps**

LUCAS for the look ahead motorist

Joseph Lucas (Sales & Service) Ltd., Birmingham 18.



The next advert is taken from the May 1970 issue of *Motor Sport*. This one is different – more subtle, but much more suggestive. The girl has very heavily made up eyes, a short skirt, and is fingering the hand-brake. How much more suggestion do you want?



85% of MG Midget owners are men.

Which means lots of girls will be relaxing in our new, thick contoured rake adjusting seats.

A scene we're sure will appeal to both driver and passenger.

As will the trendy new look. There's a new matt black recessed grille with chrome surround. New light clusters. Split rear bumpers. Black and silver Rostyle rally wheels. And round the sides you'll find black side-winders. For a long, lean look. The MG Midget comes in

four wild new colours. Glacier White, Blue Royale, Flame Red, and Bronze Yellow. And of course, you can still get Pale Primrose and British Racing Green.

Get switched on – and immediately you'll know why this is the enthusiasts' car. The famous race and rally proven twin-carb. engine performs brilliantly.

The MG Midget will give you dynamic acceleration.

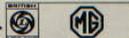
Magnificent high speed cruising. And economical fuel consumption.

We've given you all this (rake adjusting seats included) for £838*. The girl you'll have to get for yourself.

*Recommended price including P.T. Extra is charged for delivery, seat belts, number plates, radio and aerial.



Sport the real thing. MG Midget.



Only in Denmark....

On the 25th August 1968, a sports car race was held at the Jyllandsringen in Denmark. Although the result was presented as being one, it was actually made up of five races of eight laps each, spread over two days. The first race on the Sunday featured a rolling start, and rather uniquely, a topless girl on display in the pace car.

The girl's name was Brita Nielsen. I'll let Morten Alstrup, author of "50 years of Danish Motorsport", and press officer for the Danish Touring Car Cup describe the rest:

Brita Nielsen was only in "use" in one of the five heats, where she was sitting in the MG pace car, but I'm not sure whether it was her lack of clothing or it was the change in format that made Richard Broström jump that particular start, as the other heats had had standing starts (one of the heats was, however, planned to have a Le Mans-style start, but as some cars had seat belts and some not, this was scrapped). Broström was initially penalized 60 seconds for that jumped start, but following a protest, the penalty was withdrawn, but nevertheless he ended down the field in the overall result, despite taking two heat wins.

The idea of the topless girl did probably come from the organisers, who often had a tendency to try new ideas just for the sake of it. Pornography had just been legalized at that time, so there were numerous race programmes covers from those years featuring girls not having wasted their earnings at C&A....

20th February 2005 - Formula 1 Finances

Formula 1's finances in the Ecclestone era have been shrouded in mystery, which is what scuppered Bernie's 1997 attempt to take his company public on the London Stock Exchange. Wishing to raise some money and provide a trust for his family, Ecclestone decided to float a bond instead, guaranteed by the income from Formula 1. This raised billions, and helped to set in chain the events which saw Ecclestone taken to court by a group of banks in 2004. The whole chain of events involves several manoeuvres which have sailed close the wind, and have been examined extensively by *The Economist* over the years. The results of the examinations prove to be interesting reading.

In July 2000, Ecclestone was again in court, this time over the amount he paid for the commercial rights for F1 in an unusually long 100 years - \$360 million, with only a small part paid upfront. There were no competing bids, and the amount looked low compared to the \$400 million a year paid for the TV rights for NASCAR. The English judge, in summing up the civil case Ecclestone was facing, said "He has a travelling bus; this bus is rather grander than the word 'bus' normally conveys and is, perhaps, more similar to the tent of a medieval king on the battlefield. There are the equivalent of courtiers who control access to the presence." *The Economist* also claimed that "the FIA has forgone an estimated \$120 million in favour of companies closely linked to Mr Ecclestone..... they point to conflicts of interest between his FIA role, his position as boss of the F1 constructors' association and his ownership of various F1 companies."

So, at the time, how was this all controlled, and what was happening? The power and the money derive from what was set up under the 1987 and 1992 Concorde Agreements, which were put in place to control how the future decisions regarding the sport would be made, and to control the distribution of the sports' income. Under these first Concorde Agreements, the distribution of funds was split as follows:

TV Revenues

- 100% of these are paid to the Formula One Constructors' Association, FOCA.
- FOCA then pays 47% of these to the F1 teams, 30% to Allsopp, Parker & Marsh Ltd, and 23% to Formula One Promotions and Administration Ltd (FOPA) – a company owned by Bernie Ecclestone.

Fees charged to Grand Prix Promoters

- 100% of these are paid to FOCA, which passes them all to FOPA. FOPA then pays prize money to the teams from this.

This was changed slightly in the 1998 Concorde Agreement. Out went FOPA, and instead the following was set up:

TV Revenues

- 100% of these are paid to the Formula One Management Ltd (FOM).
- FOM then pays 47% of these to the F1 teams, and an indexed linked sum to the FIA, which totalled \$38 million in 1999.

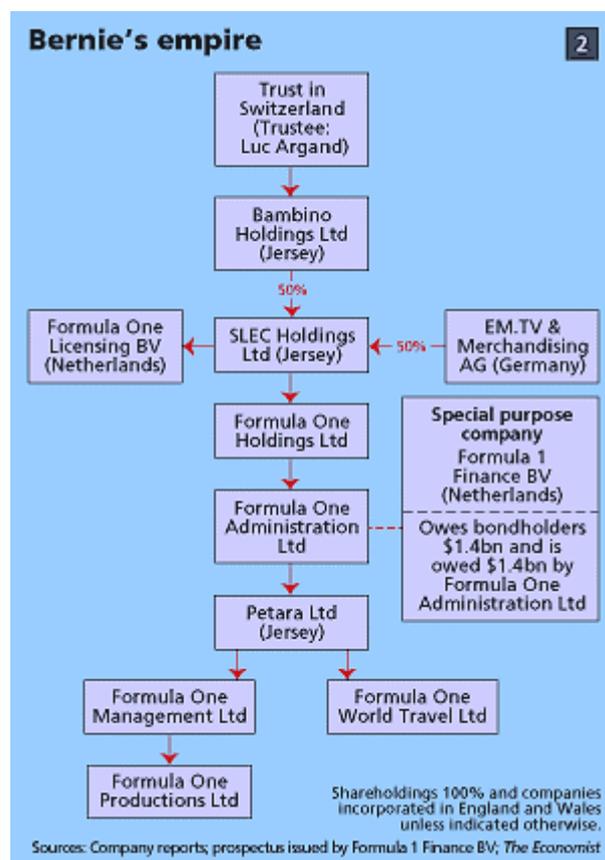
Fees charged to Grand Prix Promoters

- 100% of these are paid to FOM. FOM then pays prize money to the teams from this.

It was this deal with FOM, instead of FOCA, which was concluded for 100 years on June 28th, 2000. Note that the promoters, who pay for the right to hold the race, have to pay for track rental, advertising, FIA fees, safety personnel etc, and can only get income from ticket sales, fees from concession holders and a restricted amount of corporate hospitality. All media rights go to FOM. Note also that in the early 1990s, Mr Ecclestone also became a promoter, having run the Belgian Grand Prix. Hence he was negotiating with himself when agreeing TV rights as promoter and owner of FOPA/FOM.

Allsopp, Parker & Marsh Ltd (APM) was actually two companies. The first was British, and had as directors Luc Argand, a Swiss lawyer, and Paddy McNally, a friend of Bernie Ecclestone's. Mr Argand is also the trustee of the offshore trust set up by Mr Ecclestone for his wife, according to *The*

Economist as “part of an elaborate tax-avoidance scheme”. In 1996, Mr Ecclestone transferred two of his companies to his wife. The following diagram, published in *The Economist* on the 13th July 2000, shows the structure of these companies.



It is also interesting to note that Mr Argand is also a director of Excelis, a French company that owned the Paul Ricard circuit. Excelis is owned by the Ecclestone trust.

The second APM company was based in Ireland. It had just two shares – one owned by Mr Argand, and the others by the people in his office. *The Economist* claimed that these two companies are in fact really the same company, and that they took the income generated by the F1 Paddock Club, and that APM got the site for the Paddock Club for free. It is also interesting to note that a Swiss company set up in 1984, Allsport Management SA, owns the trackside advertising rights. The directors of Allsport of Paddy McNally, Mr Argand, and an unknown Swiss woman.....

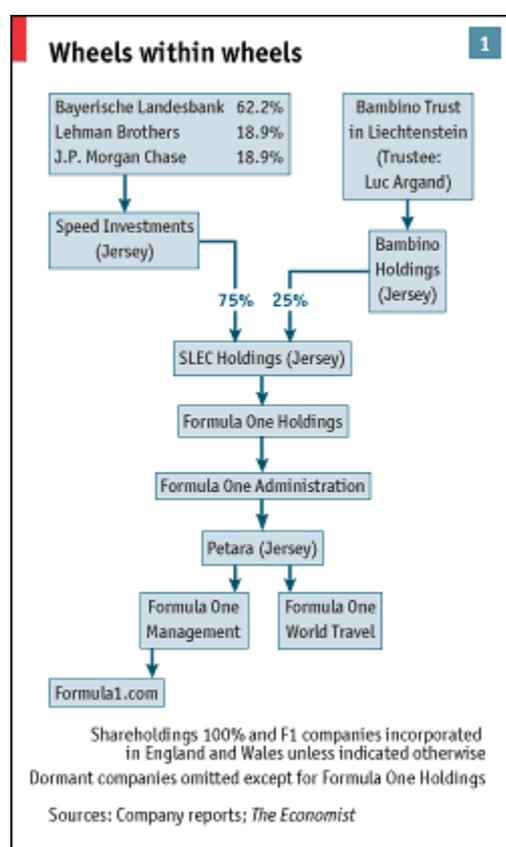
After the bond issue, the Ecclestone family trust raised a further \$1 billion by selling 50% of SLEC Holdings, a holding company for FOM. This 50% was later sold on to EM.TV, a quoted German media company based in Munich for \$1.8 billion. However, in making this purchase, EM.TV took on too much debt and overextended itself. Between the 14th February and the 6th December, EM.TV's shares fell in value from 115.50 euro to 6.75 euro. To help stem the losses, EM.TV sold part of itself to Kirch, another Munich based German media group, with Kirch paying \$550 million for 49% of EM.TV's stake in SLEC. However, Ecclestone held the right of veto over the sale, and also held the right to sell a further 25% of SLEC to EM.TV for a guaranteed \$1 billion.

By August 2001, Ecclestone had exercised his option, and Kirch and EM.TV had a joint company called Speed Ltd which owned 75% of SLEC, 49% owned by Kirch, and 51% by EM.TV. The remaining 25% of SLEC was owned by Bambino Holdings, and Ecclestone company. Kirch had funded Ecclestone's option by borrowing \$1 billion, and lending it to Speed Ltd. The reason for this complexity was that Kirch wished to avoid having to seek immediate approval from the Ecclestone family trustees for a change in control of Speed's ownership.

However, Kirch himself was in financial trouble, with his pay-TV company losing \$1.1 billion in the year to June. Not only this, but SLEC itself was in debt. Due to the bond issue, it owed \$1.4 billion, which had to be paid in full by 2010, guaranteed by the F1 revenues. However, the Grand Prix teams were starting to complain about the percentage of TV fees they received, and were threatening to set up their own Grand Prix series from 2008. If this happened, SLEC's revenue streams would dry up completely, and the value to Kirch of the SLEC stake would be zero. The manufacturers were also worried about being tied in to Kirch – Kirch's media empire was built on pay-TV, whereas the main selling point of the series so far was that it was broadcast globally on a free-to-air TV basis.

It all proved too much, and on the 8th April 2002, Leo Kirch filed for insolvency, with total debts of around \$4.8 billion, with billions of euros in other liabilities. A group of banks, to whom KirchMedia owed 1.4 billion euros, installed their own man to run the company. KirchBeteiligungs, which owned a controlling stake in Speed Ltd, was already in trouble, and the banks had earlier insisted that the stake in SLEC be put up for sale, although there had been no bidders. The entire episode had the potential to cause political problems in Germany, as Bayerische Landesbank, of which the state of Bavaria owns half, had lent the company over 1 billion euro to fund the F1 purchase.

Once the bankruptcy proceedings had completed, the ownership structure was as follows (taken from *The Economist*, 26th August 2004):



The banks, with 75% of SLEC, wanted control of the board, but Ecclestone had arranged things so that they did not, despite the fact that the previous owner Kirch had. So in 2004 the banks launched legal action against Ecclestone to rectify the situation, as they were in effect minority shareholders, and this made their shares unsellable at a fair market price.

The case was based on the following: Stephen Mullens, a British lawyer, was appointed special advisor to Bambino Trust. He was appointed to the board of Petara in 1995 by Slavica Ecclestone, Bernie's wife, who owned the company. Bambino was appointed to FOH's board in 1998, and to SLEC's board in 1999. The banks alleged that Bambino had improperly and illegitimately wrested control of FOH. The actual happenings are very complex to describe, and are explained in the following extract from *The Economist*, printed on the 26th August 2004.

Two of Bambino's directors are Luc Argand and his wife, Emmanuèle Argand-Rey, both Swiss lawyers. Mr Argand is also a trustee of Bambino Trust. Bambino and Mr and Mrs Argand, who are all defendants in the case brought by the banks, deny the bank's claims. To gain control of FOH, the banks are contesting the validity of Bambino's appointment in October 2002 of the Argands as directors of FOH, which gave Bambino control. If successful, the banks will have to launch further legal actions to win control of FOA and FOM. Only then could they wield powers commensurate with their holding in SLEC.

A shareholders' agreement (the "SLEC agreement"), signed in May 2000, sets out the composition of the boards of the FI companies. It was drawn up when EM.TV & Merchandising, a high-flying German media company, bought Speed Investments, which owned 50% of SLEC at the time, from two private equity firms. EM.TV also acquired an option to buy a further 25% of SLEC from Bambino for \$987.5m.

The SLEC agreement included various rights for Speed and Bambino to appoint directors to SLEC, FOH, FOA and FOM. These rights were written into the relevant articles of association, the legal document that governs the way a company is run.

With more than 25% of SLEC, Speed was entitled to appoint four "A" directors to each of SLEC and FOH; Bambino was similarly entitled to appoint four "B" directors. With not less than 5% but no more than 25% of SLEC, Bambino would be entitled to appoint two B directors to each company. And each of SLEC and FOH was to have a maximum of eight directors. So with 75% of SLEC, Speed could appoint two "ordinary" directors to each company as well as its four A directors.

One of Speed's four A directors on FOH's board had to be from WestLB, a German bank, which in 1999 had rescued a \$1.4 billion bond issue for FI, the proceeds of which went to Bambino.

By the end of 2000, EM.TV was engulfed in accounting problems; its shares nose-dived. Kirch, at the time a giant German media group with pay-TV interests, spotted a backdoor way of acquiring control of SLEC. The SLEC agreement required EM.TV to get Bambino's permission if a broadcaster acquired control of Speed. To circumvent this provision, a complicated deal was structured. Its essence was that Kirch funded Speed's purchase of another 25% of SLEC, and Kirch acquired control of Speed from EM.TV via an intermediary.

The total cost to Kirch was almost \$1.6 billion, which it borrowed from the banks; extraordinarily, Bayerische Landesbank, which is half-owned by the state of Bavaria, lent the \$987.5m for the option payment. The banks took security on Speed's 75% interest in SLEC.

After the option was exercised in March 2001, Speed (ie, Kirch and EM.TV), as envisaged in the SLEC agreement, controlled SLEC's board, and SLEC the board of FOH. The mechanism by which FOH controlled FOA's board was to become significant.

By now, Speed was entitled under FOA's articles to appoint one A director to FOA, and Bambino one B director. But, under the articles, FOA's shareholder (ie, FOH, which Speed controlled) was able to set the firm's maximum number of directors. A resolution by FOA in June 2001 limited the number of its directors to three. So FOH could appoint one ordinary director to FOA's board, which Speed did. Thus, from June 2001, FOA's board comprised two Speed representatives and Mr Ecclestone, who was a Bambino appointee but was not formally designated a B director.

A similar mechanism existed for control of FOM. However, apparently out of deference to the wishes of Mr Ecclestone, FOA did not take control of the board of FOM's immediate holding company, Petara, which remained in the hands of Mr Mullens and Mrs Ecclestone. And whoever controlled Petara had the ability to control FOM. Nevertheless, from June 2001, FOM'S board had the same composition as FOA's.

Before long, the Kirch group collapsed under the weight of its massive debts; the part that controlled Speed filed for bankruptcy in June 2002. The banks then enforced their security over Kirch's shareholding in Speed so that they would become entitled to exercise Speed's rights. But clearance did not come from the European Commission until late September. During this interregnum, Bambino began its grab for control of FOH, FOA and FOM. Bambino denies this: its defence is that its actions were in FI's long-term interests.

In mid-September 2002, Bambino appointed Mr Mullens as its B director of FOA, taking the number of FOA's directors to four, and simultaneously removed Speed's ordinary director on the grounds that the maximum number of three had been exceeded. As it had appointed two of the three directors, Bambino had control.

One of the four A directors on FOH's board thought that Bambino was hijacking FOA's board and resigned in protest. A week later, Bambino appointed Mr and Mrs Argand as B directors of FOH. As Mr Ecclestone and Mr Mullens were already on FOH's board, Bambino now had four directors and de facto control. But with its 25% shareholding, Bambino was entitled to appoint only two B directors to FOH, and had—Mr Ecclestone and Mr Mullens.

Another A director resigned from FOH in mid-October, which meant that there were now only two A directors on the board. FOH rejected the banks' attempts to fill the vacancies for A directors before a FOH board meeting in late October.

At this meeting, the FOH board voted, by a majority of five, which included WestLB's appointee, to one, to amend FOA's articles. The change, which Mr Mullens suggested, was small but extremely significant. Instead of being determined by a shareholder resolution (and hence within FOH's control), FOA's maximum number of directors was simply to be three. As the change to FOA's articles cannot be reversed without Bambino's consent (or alternatively a court challenge), the effect was to entrench Bambino's control of FOA, even if the banks were to regain control of FOH.

Bambino used similar manoeuvres in FOM, though the process was simpler because Mr Mullens and Mrs Ecclestone already controlled Petara's board. In July 2002, Bambino appointed Mr Mullens as its B director to FOM's board; in mid-September, Petara removed Speed's ordinary representative on FOM's board; and a month later Petara made the same small but significant change to FOM's articles.

In short, Ecclestone had tried to exploit the resignation of key directors to pass changes in company rules which allowed him to appoint directors and thus gain management control which was not commensurate with his shareholding.

On the 6th December 2004, Ecclestone lost his court-case – in fact, it never got as far as a full trial, as the judge stated that Bambino had “no real prospect” of defending the banks’ claim. So, the banks then controlled the board of FOH, but Bambino controlled the board of FOA (with Ecclestone chief executive). The articles of association had been changed in 2002 and couldn’t be undone without Bambino’s consent, although the banks could challenge this in court as well, and were likely to win. Ecclestone still appeared nonchalant, stating “this is nothing to do with me. I’m not even on the board of FOH. The banks got a stake in something they didn’t want and now they’re trying to get out without losing too much money.”

Two weeks later, Mr Ecclestone gave FOA £1, and in return got 50% of the voting shares in the company, when previously FOH was the sole holder of FOA’s voting shares – the board of FOH was now under control of the banks following the court verdict. This neatly reduced the power of the banks, despite them publicly saying after the court verdict that they wished to leave Mr Ecclestone in place given his 30 years of experience in running the business. If the banks did challenge the articles of association of FOA, and the limit of three directors, it wouldn’t matter to Ecclestone, as he now had equal voting power and would be able to match the bank’s board appointments. The banks could never get the amount of board power commensurate with their shareholding.

The banks are suing Ecclestone again, having filed their brief on the 5th January. It is not yet publicly announced what this matter is about, but there can be little doubt that this is about the £1 deal. The banks haven’t yet commented on the matter, and neither have Mr Ecclestone or Mr Mullens. The only thing we can be reasonably sure about is that Mr Ecclestone wishes to maintain the control he has always had, despite selling three quarters of the main holding company to raise money for himself. This is going to run on for some time to come.

20th March 2005 - The Malaysian Grand Prix

Strangely enough, the Australian Grand Prix did prove to be an accurate indicator for the next race, rather than proving to be a freak result. The Renault really is as good as it looks, Ferrari are screwed, and Red Bull Racing have made a big leap forward.

The race was also ironic when viewed from the position of BAR-Honda. They retired two healthy cars in Australia in order to fit fresh engines (a loop-hole since “clarified” by the FIA). The new engines fitted were of a different specification, and supposedly more reliable. However, within five laps of the start, both had boiled their internals and dumped their liquids trackside. Don’t despair though – the team can fit fresh engines again for Bahrain.....

The biggest improver over the winter has to be Red Bull Racing, and specifically Christian Klien. He had looked out of his depth last year at Jaguar, and it seemed that he was very lucky in keeping his seat for the year. A years experience, and the threat of Vitantonio Liuzzi as the team’s third driver, ready to take the race seat whenever required, seems to have enabled Klien to make the big leap forward. Although in both Grands Prix he has been beaten by his team-mate David Coulthard, it has never been by that much. It will be interesting to see if he can maintain this form over the coming season.

Ferrari’s strategy of starting the year with a modified 2004 car looks to have backfired badly, with the Australian Grand Prix flattering to deceive. It looked as though the lottery of qualifying had blown their Grand Prix in Australia, with Barrichello fighting back to second. In Malaysia, the true state of the situation was revealed – the car isn’t good enough, and the tyres are not up to the job. Both Ferrari drivers qualified well down the field, Schumacher in 14th. Barrichello pulled out of the race six laps from the end when out of the points and going backwards – his softer rear Bridgestone tyres had lost their tread completely, and were effectively slicks – in order not to have an accident. Schumacher looked most disinterested for most of the race, and scraped a couple of points due to the misfortunes of others, rather than anything he did. There will be recriminations in Maranello, as they will be highly unaccustomed to the state of affairs. It will be interesting to see their reaction – will they over-react in their attempts to rectify the situation (the traditional Italian response), or will they work their way back into it methodically, the usual Todt and Brawn approach?

What was clear during the race is that the performance of Renault is a true performance – they once again led from start to finish near enough, although this time with Alonso rather than Fisichella. Fisichella hadn’t got his car set up as he wanted it, and it showed, especially in his more and more desperate attempts to stay in third place, culminating in his accident with Webber. Fisichella took far too much speed into the final corner, and was always going to lose the place, as was obviated by his four wheel drift at the apex. Webber, a little to impatient to get past, was attempting to go around the outside, and acted as the brake for Fisichella’s drift. Both were out on the spot and both denied responsibility in their interviews. Sorry lads, you were both at fault. Fischella was always sliding out, and Webber put his car in danger. File it away under “lesson learnt”. The outcome of it all was a safe third place for Heidfeld, good reward for a good drive.

Also noteworthy was the performance of Toyota, with both cars looking like top 10 cars, more befitting of the biggest global car manufacturer than their performances so far. In both races so far, Trulli has got the upper hand over Ralf Schumacher, and to be frank, I don’t see that changing much over the rest of the year, one or two races excepting. Ralf did at least fight and trade places with the Williams drivers, but he never looked like being on the pace of Trulli. Being twice on the front row will do wonders for Trulli’s confidence, and his race performance helped to belie his “good qualifier/bad racer” moniker. Put him in a good car with a chance, and give him the backing of the team (seemingly lacking from Briatore last year), and he will do wonders. As a result, Ralf is being shown to be what he really is – a competent driver who can bring the car home, who will spring the occasional great drive, but not the next world champion, whatever his surname may suggest.

The US and Europe

My most recent project has had me looking at early races in the US, in the years 1900-1908. From these early beginnings, it is clear to see why US racing has developed in a different way to that in Europe.

Early European races were almost exclusively based on public roads, with races either being point-to-point affairs between the cities, or based on circuits which were 10s of kilometres long. However, at the same time in the US, most of the races were being held on horse racing tracks. There were road races, such as the Vanderbilt Cup and American Grand Prize events at venues such as Long Island, but these were in the minority. Most of the early circuits were one mile dirt ovals, and although these later gave way to purpose built venues, these newer venues were also ovals, either built from wood, or from bricks (hence why Indianapolis is known as the Brickyard). Which perhaps explains why the majority of venues in the US today are still ovals. In the case of Europe, the venues gradually got smaller and smaller, until they became purpose built venues such as Monza.

Early US race meetings are also noteworthy for the range of different races they held. One example is the Cupid Race – drivers would have to do a lap, pick up a woman passenger, and the continue on their way. Even then, 24 hour races were common, being held on a variety of venues, which led to a huge number of laps being completed when they were held on 1 mile ovals. The rules though were slightly different to those of today – drivers were frequently allowed to change cars should they have an accident, as long as the car was of the same type!

One other anecdote: during an 24 hour endurance race at Morris Park in 1907, a driver called Luther Smelzer crashed and was killed. After the event, two women turned up to claim the body. Both claimed to be his wife.....

3rd April 2005 - Ferrari Did *What?*

It had to happen eventually, but what circumstances for it to happen. Ferrari suffered a mechanical breakdown! It was the first mechanical breakdown for Michael Schumacher in some 58 Grands Prix, since a fuel pump failure in the 2001 German Grand Prix at Hockenheim. It was all a function of Ferrari finally being put under pressure, and Ferrari have finally been found wanting.

Their predicament stems from a moment of hubris at the end of 2004. Ferrari started to believe that they really were that much better than everyone else, and decided not to ready a brand new car for the first race of the season, despite the numerous rule changes and necessary chassis modifications. Ferrari flattered to deceive with their modified car in Melbourne, as the weather in qualifying and Barrichello's excellent drive masked the problems that they really had. This was driven home by the lacklustre showing in Malaysia.

What has also come back to bite Ferrari is their insistence on Bridgestone developing a tyre which only suits their car. The result of this is that one by one the rival teams defected to Michelin, which has reaped dividends given the rule changes for tyres this year. Tyres have to last the whole race, so by necessity have to be harder. But how much harder? This can only be found by testing, and Bridgestone only have Ferrari and Jordan to do it for them. Michelin by contrast have the remaining eight teams to test for them, a massive advantage. And Michelin got it right.

Ferrari decided to mobilise their massive resources and ready their definitive 2005 car for the Bahrain GP, instead of for the Grand Prix of Imola. This is a massive undertaking, and the results of the effort showed throughout the weekend, particularly on Barrichello's car – he suffered two gearbox failures before he even got to the grid for the race. He started from the back of the grid, and he looked very quick as he made his way up into the top 10. However, once he got there he didn't really look like making it much further. Also, as the race went on, his car began to eat its tyres, and he dropped out of the points with only a couple of laps to go, overtaken by David Coulthard's Red Bull.

At least he made the finish. Michael Schumacher had managed to qualify second, and to begin with it looked as though the usual Ferrari pattern was asserting itself, with his team-mates suffering the problems while he went serenely on his way. He was in a good second place, hassling Alonso while never looking like really making a proper challenge. This became academic when Schumacher suffered a hydraulic failure – Schumacher went sailing on his merry way into the wild blue (or should that be yellow, given the desert?) yonder which are the copious run off areas as his car couldn't slow as quickly as usual due to the gear change suddenly not working. He toured around and went back into the pits.

Ferrari haven't had such a dismal showing for years, and it will be very interesting to see their reaction. Will they relapse into their old Italian ways, or will Todt, Brawn and Montezemelo still be able to drag them through? For some of the team, this will be a new experience, and it goes to show that having the biggest budget doesn't guarantee success – you have to use your resources wisely. It also shows why Ferrari have been insistent in their refusal to limit the number of days of testing – imagine how much further back they would have been if they couldn't have spent every day so far this year testing at either Fiorano or Mugello (and sometimes both together with different test teams).

A team which is now showing how to spend a huge budget wisely is Toyota. They have gone from being the white elephant of the grid to genuine second place contenders, at least they are in Trulli's hands. Mike Gascoyne has demonstrated again that he is a master of re-organisation and systems management, and has finally got Toyota working together. They are now producing a chassis worthy of their engine. Toyota have a history of eventually winning championships that they enter – witness their success in CART and the IRL, but it is interesting that they have had to lose almost all of their original senior management to do it.

The race itself was notable for its race of attrition, with fewer finishers than for many a race, a result of engines having to last for two race meetings, and an air temperature of 42 degrees Celsius. The demands of an engine having to last for two meetings was demonstrated graphically by Heidfeld's Williams. He had had a new engine fitted for the Malaysian Grand Prix, a legacy of his *contretemps*

with Mikey in Melbourne, and given the heat and humidity of the race his engine received a pounding. The temperatures of Bahrain proved too much, and Heidfeld's engine lost its cylinders in a cloud of smoke. Most others on the grid had fresh engines, and it showed.

Special mention must also go to Pedro de la Rosa, who was standing in for Juan Pablo Montoya – he had sustained a hair-line shoulder fracture in dubious circumstances. Montoya said he sustained it playing tennis, although there were rumours suggesting otherwise. Either way, Dennis said that it was Montoya who would suffer, as his contract stated that he wouldn't be paid if he didn't race. "An expensive tennis injury" was how he succinctly put it.

De la Rosa wanted to make the most of his opportunity, and was racy all afternoon, although his lack of match practiced showed with at least two missed braking moments (he should thank his lucky stars he was at Bahrain – he would have been out of the race at most other venues). Still, he managed to overtake several drivers, including Barrichello and Webber, and demonstrated the inherent speed that the McLaren now has. It also showed how kind the McLaren is to its tyres, as his looked nowhere near as worn as those on the other cars come the end of the race. If they could just sort out their performance in qualifying, then they might stand a chance of going for a race win. However, if they got into that position, we may well find that Alonso and Renault could go even faster. They simply haven't been stretched enough this year for us to find out.

24th April 2005 - No Testing Limits, So No Problem

The San Marino Grand Prix highlighted a couple of things. Firstly, why Ferrari won't agree to testing limits, and secondly, what a threat Ferrari will be once they sort out their reliability.

According to *Autosport* magazine, Ferrari spent around £11 million over the past three weeks in testing, completing some 5000 miles of testing to try and sort out their reliability issues from Bahrain. That is a third of the total annual budget of Minardi in just 5.7% of a year. No wonder Ferrari don't want to limit testing as part of the cost cutting exercises when they can spend money like that – I doubt that any of the other teams could marshal such resources. However, they didn't cure everything – Barrichello suffered a gearbox failure on Friday according to Italian press sources, and he retired from the race with an electronic problem.

But what the testing does seem to have done is to teach the Ferrari team how to set up their car correctly, as manifested by Michael Schumacher when he was in clear air. He may have started in thirteenth after a mistake in qualifying, but he was fuel heavy, and when those in front of him peeled into the pits, he was reeling off laps some two seconds a lap faster than those around him. This is somewhat ominous for the rest of the season, for if Michael hadn't made his qualifying mistake, he would probably have been far enough up the field to disappear into the distance at the pit-stops, rather than just reeling in the top two of Alonso and Button.

As a result it looks like we may be back to service as usual from the Spanish Grand Prix onwards, with Ferrari ahead of the rest, and three or four teams scrapping behind them. McLaren might take issue with this assessment, as Kimi Räikkönen qualified on pole and went into the lead at the start of the race, pulling away by up to two seconds a lap at one point. However, we was out within six laps due to a mechanical failure, so we never got to see whether the rumour that he was fuel light or not was correct. Perhaps Alexander Wurz, who was standing in for Juan Pablo Montoya, is a good barometer of McLaren's status, as he finished in a solid fourth behind the BAR of Button. They are almost there, but not quite.

BAR though do seem to have made a big step forward, both in reliability and speed. One of the problems that they had been facing was that under certain situations, the air over the front wing would stall, losing downforce. So they went back to the wind-tunnel, and whatever they came up with seemed to work, as he could at least maintain a similar pace to the Renault of Alonso. This was also reflected by the pace of Sato, who finished a combative fifth. Sato is definitely the best Formula 1 driver to come out of Japan, and his pass on Mark Webber was an absolute gem, firm but fair. However, this year he has been consistently slower than Button, so he needs to take care of his future – if Button doesn't leave BAR, then they might consider taking a punt on the next new thing, as they wouldn't have that much to lose.

One curious thing this year is how in each team the bad luck seems to always strike the same driver. Take Renault for instance – Alonso has now won three races in a row, and finished second in the first race, but Fisichella has had two mechanical failures in a row. It's the same at McLaren – whoever they have partnering Räikkönen, it is always him who has the failure. At Ferrari, it is always Barrichello who suffers with the gearbox. The cars are always supposedly identical within a team, but you can't help but wonder sometimes if the same degree of thoroughness is always used – perhaps there is some unintentional bias in the preparation of the cars at Renault and Ferrari? I don't mention McLaren in this, as Räikkönen is probably their preferred number 1 – perhaps he drives his car harder than the others?

Although the race was exciting to watch due to the closeness of the finish, it again has to be highlighted the general lack of overtaking, and how track design contributes towards this. Since the rules raised the height of the front wing, the cars have become very nervous when following cars through corners, which makes it even more difficult to try and close up and out-drag down the next straight. Tracks such as Imola contribute towards this – lots of medium to slow speed corners without that much in the way of long straights to catch up in, and when there are long straights, they aren't followed by slow speed corners where downforce doesn't matter much. All of the revisions to Imola have simply made it worse. Yes, the circuit may have history, but history alone doesn't give it the automatic right to a place

on the calendar. It's not even as though the circuit is in San Marino, as the principality is some 50 kilometres away at least. So, given the fact that the precedence that has been set, why not have a second Grand Prix in Britain at Brands Hatch, and let's call it the Welsh Grand Prix. Can't be any worse than the Grand Prix of Luxembourg at the Nürburgring.....

8th May 2005 - A Game of Tyres

(and when is cheating not cheating?)

The Spanish Grand Prix was all about tyres, but the story of the weekend was BAR and their court-case against the FIA in Paris.

The rumpus dates back to the San Marino Grand Prix. When Jenson Button's car was taken to scrutineering after the race, it passed its weight check. However, the FIA must have been tipped off, as they then asked the team to drain the fuel tank. When the last drop of fuel came out, the FIA asked BAR if that was all of the fuel. They said it was, but it turned out that there was an extra tank within the main fuel tank, and when this was drained, the car came in 5.4 kg underweight.

This is where the complications start. BAR maintained that this tank was necessary to maintain the correct fuel pressure to the engine, and that if it wasn't there, then the engine wouldn't even run. Therefore they always kept the tank full, and with it full they were always over the 600 kg weight limit. The stewards of the meeting accepted the explanation and passed the car as OK. However, the FIA didn't agree with the interpretation, as they argued that the car could run below the 600 kg weight limit during the race, and took the BAR team to the sporting court to prove their case.

The problem is that the rules are a touch vague in this area. The rules say that the car plus driver must weigh above 600 kg at all times, and that movable ballast cannot be used. It does not say that this is the dry weight of the car, i.e. the car minus any fluids. In fact, when they measure the car, it includes oil and water weights, so is in no way a dry measurement. BAR argued that they were always above the weight limit. The FIA said that the tank wasn't necessary, and that the car could run with less fuel until the final pit-stop, and so be below the weight limit, and then they could put enough fuel in to make sure that the car passed the weight limit after the race.

What is interesting is the decision of the court, as they stated that BAR did not cheat, despite whatever has been claimed in the press. What the court did state is that the team was negligent in not clarifying with the FIA that what they were doing was legal, and they lacked transparency in what they were doing – they should have discussed everything with the FIA. The FIA accepted that their rules were not clear in this area. It might have been accepted practice that the weight of the car was expected to be the weight of the car with an empty fuel tank, but it didn't say this explicitly in the regulations. Therefore BAR hadn't technically cheated.

As a result, the exclusion of the team for three races seems extremely harsh, as the team had been proven to have not done anything against the rules. I believe that the FIA should have disqualified the team from the San Marino Grand Prix for breaking the spirit of the rules, re-written the rules for the Spanish Grand Prix to clarify what they meant, and then let the team compete as normal. The FIA is effectively saying that despite whatever the court has said, they believe that BAR was cheating. This is a very good way of winning friends and influencing people, especially given their arguments with the Grand Prix teams and manufacturers. They have probably made an even bigger enemy.

What stinks about this entire situation is why the FIA didn't do anything about this before, as it is obvious that they knew about it. Takuma Sato finished the race in Australia, and would have had to pass scrutineering then, and it had the same fuel tank. And yet they did nothing. They waited until BAR finished in the points before pouncing. In addition, Max Mosley, President of the FIA, then went on TV and publicly stated that BAR had cheated. Surely BAR have a case for libel here given the verdict of the court? However, given that BAR didn't appeal the verdict "for the good of the sport", I doubt that they will push this further.

Talking about the good of the sport, Jean Todt in the past two weeks has proven that Ferrari don't care when it comes to the good of F1. In an interview with *Autosport*, Jean Todt stated that the rest of the F1 teams should "respect" the fact that Ferrari haven't tested as much as they could have done. He stated that they could have tested at Imola before the race, and could have tested every day, but that they chose not to. Why should Ferrari be penalized for owning Fiorano and Mugello? This shows the total

disconnect between the Ferrari world view and everyone else. It costs something like £1000 or so per lap of testing, and Ferrari have done three or four times the amount of testing of anyone else. And Ferrari call this cost-cutting. They also complain that there are seven teams testing Michelin tyres, and only three testing Bridgestone's, and therefore they need to do more testing than the others. That is purely down to Bridgestone building tyres only for Ferrari – McLaren used to use Bridgestone's, and switched to Michelin exactly for this reason. Ferrari have only themselves to blame.

Ah, yes, I remember now, the race! The race was all about tyres, and how the various cars used them. Easiest on the tyres is the McLaren, and Kimi Räikkönen demonstrated how effective a car he has when it holds together. He reeled off lap record after lap record as he scampered off into the distance, and he had the race won after about 20 laps, when he was almost a full pit-stop ahead of the field. As long as his car held together, there was little anyone else can do. An interesting aside is that the fastest lap of the race, set by Giancarlo Fisichella on the last lap, was 1.5 seconds faster than the fastest lap in 2004, and this is despite a cut in down-force, tyres which must last an entire weekend, and engines which must last for two races. Development in the world of F1 seems to get increasingly rapid.

The fact that McLaren finally solved their reliability issues pushed Renault into showing a chink or two in their armour. Although Alonso finished in second place, with Fisichella fifth, he was pushed hard enough to blister his rear tyres, which shows that the balance of the car isn't as good as that of McLaren. Lacking a lot of balance is the Williams, which was showing extreme tyre wear even at the final pit-stops, with the grooves of Webber's front left almost completely extinct with twenty laps to go. They are fast enough to qualify well, but lack the balance to maintain that over a race distance. Also, Webber is showing worrying signs of being too easily overtaken during races. He had a reputation of being a hard racer while at Jaguar, but this is being fast eroded at Williams.

And what of Ferrari? I would suggest that they will be racking up many more thousands of expensive testing miles to sort out their tyre issues. What was shown quite clearly by the disastrous showing this time around was how well Bridgestone had made their decision at Imola. Ferrari were two seconds a lap faster than anyone else in Schumacher's hands, yet weren't really there at all at Barcelona. When the fuel burnt off, Schumacher could set competitive times, but otherwise it wasn't ever going to be a winning combination this weekend. It all became academic when Schumacher suffered a tyre failure, followed shortly later by another failure and/or a suspension failure. With Barrichello finishing outside the points following an engine change in practice, it was a rare *null point* for Ferrari. Perhaps we haven't yet seen the full potential of the F2005 this year, but the likelihood of a constructors and drivers championship double is looking less and less likely. That will give the boys in Maranello something to think about, and it will be a good test of their temperament. They aren't used to losing, and it will be interesting to see whether they throw their toys out of their pram, or whether they can channel their disappointment into doing something about it.

22nd May 2005 - Shoot the TV director (Again!)

It's two laps to go, and there are five cars within about half a second of each other fighting for positions four down to eight. It was shaping up for an incredible few minutes of action where anything could happen. So what does the TV director do? He cuts to Kimi Räikkönen, who was busy swanning along, on his merry way to an easy victory. He had backed off, and had no-one on track around him. So we follow him around for two laps and watch him cross the finishing line. Then we wait for Heidfeld, and then Webber to cross the finishing line. Only now do we cut to the battle, to see what happened, to the only really interesting thing happening on the track. What was the TV director thinking? It really is time that Bernie insists on having the same TV director at every race so that we can have some consistent race coverage. We couldn't even blame ITV for this one.

For the race (the Monaco GP), both Ferrari and Renault dropped the ball, and suffered as a result. For Ferrari, the problem was with the drivers. Although they didn't qualify particularly well, they were doing reasonably well in the race until one of the Minardi's spun at Mirabeau. Next around the corner was the Red Bull of David Coulthard, who was looking to have a good afternoon's racing, having qualified inside the top 10 while brimmed with fuel, and was keeping up with the cars in front of him. He saw the Minardi broadside across the track, and dove to the left of the car to avoid it, slowing all the time. Following close behind was Michael Schumacher, who was unsighted behind Coulthard's rear wing. He piled straight in to the back of the Red Bull, riding up on the rear wheel. He removed his front wing, and also removed the diffuser of Coulthard's Red Bull, breaking his rear wing in the process. This blocked the track for Massa, Barrichello and Montoya who arrived shortly afterwards. By finding reverse, Massa managed to work his way around the blockage, and this proved to be the key to unlocking the mess. However, it took long enough to sort out that the safety car was scrambled.

Schumacher pitted immediately for repairs, and was a lap down as a result. Barrichello was in a better position, but when he next came in for fuel, he stalled his car. Having been restarted, he was in such a hurry to get away that he forgot to switch on his pit-lane limiter, and he suddenly jammed on his brakes as he realised his faux pas. However, it was all on camera, and the stewards were vigilant, and he was in a lap later for a drive-through penalty. They were very lucky indeed to come home 7th and 8th, and went some way to salvaging something from the afternoon.

Schumacher's wing removing antics provided the opportunity for Renault to screw up royally. They took the opportunity to bring both cars in at the same time, queuing the cars up behind one another. They then filled up both cars to the brim, confident that they could last until the end. This told us some interesting information – Renault have a very large fuel tank indeed. However, they badly underestimated the effect on the tyres, and the effect of queuing the cars. Having been 2nd and 3rd ante-accident, post-accident they were 3rd and 8th, Fisichella missing out massively. But of interest was the rear tyre wear. The rear facing camera on Alonso's car showed that they were already quite worn – the car was running with a very large amount of camber, which means that the tyres were tilted inwards a lot at the top, which stresses the inside edge of the tyre more. Thus as the race went on, the inner tread lines were the first to go. At the time of the accident, two of the five tread lines had already worn away. On full tanks and with fifty laps to go, how long would it take for the car to erase the other three?

About thirty laps, give or take. The tyres went completely slick, and lap times suffered by up to four seconds a lap. It became a matter of when something would happen, rather than if. It might be exceedingly difficult to overtake in Monaco, but it is not absolutely impossible given the right phase of the moon and the correct wind. Fisichella was the first victim. Jarno Trulli was getting bored with following him around, what with Montoya, Ralf Schumacher, Barrichello and Michael Schumacher all snapping at his heels. Going into Loews hairpin, he dived down the inside and up onto the kerbs – Fisichella had to give way, and go wide. As he went wide, Montoya went inside him, and then drove past the recovering Trulli. Fisichella was still on the outside, and over the next two corners he dropped behind the lot of them, as the all aggressively dived either side of him. Given this, what would happen to Alonso?

Alonso was being hunted down by the two Williams drivers, Heidfeld in front of Webber due to pitting one lap earlier for fuel. It took a couple of laps, but he managed to dive down the inside into the chicane at the tunnel exit when Alonso's attention was fixed on a back marker. Heidfeld then

disappeared up the road at three seconds a lap, just to highlight the Renault predicament. Webber was next up, but Alonso was now wise to the mood.

The next couple of laps were exciting, if a touch controversial. Webber tried the same move as Heidfeld, and didn't quite make the turn in for the chicane. However, he still attempted to, and near enough followed the actual path of the race track. Alonso meanwhile simply straight-lined the chicane, and continued in the lead. This meant that he hadn't done a full complete lap, and had gained advantage for going off track. Surely he should yield the position to Webber?

Not likely, so two laps later Webber tried the same again. Webber got the chicane even more wrong, but Alonso deliberately turned off the circuit and into the middle of the tarmac area behind the chicane to accelerate around Webber, who was in his way on the track. However, this time Webber had enough acceleration to stay with Alonso and force the issue. This was aggressive stuff, but perhaps Alonso was pushing the envelope a little too much. Having lost the corner, he chose to deliberately cheat by turning off the circuit, and gained advantage by doing so, even if he ultimately lost his position. He'll probably get away with it, but given the FIA's stance on BAR and gaining the unfair advantage, they ought to at least have a quiet word in his ear. After all, he tried it twice.

McLaren may have demonstrated how well they can now run (Montoya's run to fifth was also worthy of mention, given his starting position), but special mention must go to Williams, who finished second and third, Heidfeld in front of Webber. It is quite a turnaround, although the finishing order obviously irked Webber, who had a face like a yard of pump-water in the drivers interview. His demeanour and tone of voice radiated pissed-offness. However, even more pissed off has to be Coulthard. He was fuelled longer than both of the Williams, and was only six seconds behind them when he was Schumachered. A possible podium was been waved goodbye yet again. When will his luck ever change for the better?

29th May 2005 - When is a tyre a dangerous tyre?

When Räikkönen's right front suspension let go as he started the final lap, the commentators were already drawing their conclusions. "He should have come in and changed it," said ITV's James Allen, pointing out that he would have had at least four points rather than none. Mark Blundell and Martin Brundle were both of the opinion that as a racer you had to risk it and go for it. All of this over a flat-spotted tyre. But this raises an interesting question given this year's rules – what constitutes an unsafe tyre?

In the event that a tyre is unsafe, the driver is allowed to change it, but can only change the tyre for another used one. Thus in the event of a puncture, such as the one experienced by Felipe Massa during the race, the driver can come in and change the tyre. However, if the driver locks up his brakes and creates a flat spot on his tyre, it is considered to be tough luck – you have to put up with the result of your driving error and live with it. And this has been the case so far this year. However, when does a flat spot become dangerous?

In the case of Räikkönen, it was patently obvious from the in-car camera that he was in serious trouble. The right-front of the car was visibly vibrating up and down as the tyre rotated, and the flat spot was causing the tyre to wobble from side to side under braking. It was obvious that the degree of flat-spottedness was unusually severe, but was it dangerous?

The end of the chain of events showed that it was, as the suspension gave way under the unusual torsional loads generated. But imagine that he had pitted to change the tyre, what then?

If a tyre is changed, the FIA has the right to inspect it to see if it was really damaged, and in the case of Räikkönen, the tyre was relatively undamaged. Yes it had a flat spot, but even after the accident the tyre remained inflated. It wasn't deflated, it wasn't delaminating, and it didn't have any sidewall injuries (at least, none were obvious or reported). Thus the tyre might have been declared to be safe, and in these circumstances Räikkönen could have been disqualified from the race. If these circumstances had occurred and I had been in Ferrari's position, I would have been the first to protest the McLaren, as there would have been nothing to lose. If Ferrari won the protest, both cars gain a position, and if it lost, so what?

What is needed now is for the FIA to issue a clarification over what they consider to be an unsafe tyre. When is a flat spot considered to be more than just a flat spot? Until these things are clarified to the nth degree, another grey area exists in the rules to be exploited, and do we really need another BAR type saga over rules interpretation? Not really.

The race itself was a cracker from the start, with close racing throughout the field and no one team dominating the standings. Both of the Williams' made notably better starts, although Webber somewhat over-cooked his braking into the first corner, collected Montoya, and sailed onwards into the gravel trap (he was the first of only three non-finishers, an astounding degree of reliability being shown throughout the field). Although the grid positions of the Williams pair seem to have been flattered by light fuel loads, they did show good race pace, which shows that although the Monaco result somewhat flattered the team, their step up in pace has not been a false dawn. Heidfeld made the most of it with another second position. Although there isn't much to choose in pace between the Williams pair, it is striking how Heidfeld seems to keep out of trouble and finish. He may prove to be the bargain of the season for Williams.

Also notable this weekend was the continued lack of performance of the Ferrari, and yet again Barrichello out-qualifying, and to some degree out-racing Michael Schumacher. There can be fewer excuses this time. The race temperatures were not excessively hot (strike one tyre excuse), it was possible to overtake on this circuit, as demonstrated by Barrichello (strike one driver excuse), yet still they didn't make a huge impression (except for one by Michael Schumacher's chassis in a gravel trap as he took a ride through it). Their finishing positions owed more to the misfortunes of others than any particular pace. The pace of the car seems to be highly affected by the fuel load, but in a perverse inverse way. Most other cars get faster as the fuel load comes down, but the Ferrari's somehow get slower. And if the team can't get it right at the Nürburgring, a track which is quite average in speed and

layout, then it doesn't bode well for the rest of the season. The team is not used to this any more, and it will be interesting to see whether they come through it or self-destruct.

What Ferrari's predicament will do is to entrench their position even more over testing. They are the one team holding out over limiting the number of test days that can be held, and given that they will have to test even more to try and eradicate their problems, the likelihood of them signing any agreement limiting this are slim to none. Expect more fireworks over the rest of the season. Also queue huge amounts of schadenfreude if Ferrari do put in all of this testing, and still can't beat the rest of the teams who limited themselves to the 30 days they agreed on.

The European Grand Prix saw the return of BAR, and in shooting off their mouths about how fast they would be, they seem to have missed their target and hit their foot instead. Given that the race engines would have been sitting around for five weeks doing nothing, they were always going to have to take it gently in order not to break their engines. Race engines these days are built out of all sorts of weird and wonderful metal alloys, and it was quite possible that sitting around while holding fuel internally would cause a degree of oxidation which could harm the engine. In the end both engines lasted the race distance, but how much did the team back off from full power to ensure that they finished? We will probably never know, but it was an inauspicious return with both cars finishing outside of the points.

A special mention has to go to the Red Bull team, and particularly David Coulthard. All too often Coulthard is a figure of fun, never quite achieving what his talent should do, yet since joining Red Bull the lifting of expectation seems to have rejuvenated his driving. Although he qualified outside of the top ten, a legacy of Ferrari chewing his rear at Monaco and the resulting early qualifying slot, he was up to fourth by the second corner, and finished in the same position, his race spoiled slightly by a pit-lane speeding violation caused by excessive zeal in trying to get out of the pits ahead of a Minardi. If it hadn't been for that, he might have been on the podium. Coulthard has been quietly amassing points all season, and will probably finish unexpectedly high in the final championship standings, unforeseen events notwithstanding!

A final mention has to go to ITV, yet again. Their scheduled race coverage time was only just enough to fit in the race and the podium celebrations, and they cut away to some awful program before the official top 3 driver interviews. Come on ITV, didn't you learn enough at Barcelona?

12th June 2005 - Kimi wins through as McLaren are almost buttoned up (Groan!)

There were two races this weekend. The first was the Canadian Grand Prix. The second was my dinner. Given the fact that it started at 6pm here in the UK, could I manage to cook my dinner and eat it before the end of the race without burning it? Kimi Räikkönen won the first, and I won the second.

ITV's adverts and the safety car from Button's faux pas at the final corner helped me in my race in the same way that it helped Kimi and destroyed Montoya's. Button had clattered over the kerbs on the exit of the final chicane, and as a result he glanced the Champions Wall, breaking his suspension in the process. The race directors brought out the safety car to clear up the mess. Misunderstanding the call from the pits, Montoya drove past the pit entrance and continued onwards for another lap, so Kimi came in instead and took advantage of the space in the pits. Montoya came in the next time around, but when he was released from his pit, the safety car was driving down the finishing straight. The rules say that in these situations, the pit exit is closed for safety reasons, but through either panic or not being able to distinguish the colour of the light through the red mist, Montoya shot through the pit lane and forced his way into the traffic between Kimi and David Coulthard. Almost immediately he was under investigation by the stewards, and a lap later he was black-flagged. He had been well and truly buttoned up.

But lets wind time back a little bit. The reason for the McLaren's being in first and second was due to Renault dropping the ball again. Although they hadn't started on the first row, bad starts by both Button and Schumacher and the usual excellent ones by Renault meant that they were first and second by the first corner, but not in the normal order, as Fisichella was leading Alonso. And surprisingly enough, there it stayed for the next few laps, much to the consternation of Alonso. Alonso realised that he was faster, but couldn't do anything about it, and his driving got slightly more ragged as a result.

Mind you, the cars looked very skittish to start with. All of the cars were in low downforce configuration, and the combination of a lack of downforce and bumps meant that the cars were moving around a lot, and any slight error was amplified. This caught out Alonso once Fisichella's engine had lost oil pressure. Skating slightly wide coming out of a corner, he brushed a wall with his right-rear, and broke part of the suspension. The damage was terminal, but the episode had highlighted a flaw in the Alonso character, and no doubt it will have been noted, and will be exploited by the cleverer of the drivers.

This left Montoya and Räikkönen in first and second, which is where we came in. With Montoya removed, Michael Schumacher was now in second, with Trulli third. It stayed that way for a lap, at which point the Toyota gave way. Yet another brace of points given up. Barrichello was then in third, good reward for a drive from the back of the grid following yet another gearbox failure in practice. This is someone who is so unlucky that even when taken around on the drivers' parade, his car breaks down.

So what does this mean for the championship? Well, Räikkönen has closed the gap to 22 points, but Renault are still in the driving seat, so to speak – the championship is still theirs to lose. However, this is perhaps slightly more likely given that they are showing increasing signs of frailty these days. Plus the season is moving into an extremely busy period, with six races in eight weekends, so finding a way to combat this without losing any competitiveness will be extremely difficult. For Ferrari, there was a chink of light with a large haul of points, but they are still showing a worrying lack of competitiveness – despite qualifying with seemingly the least amount of fuel, Schumacher could still only qualify second. They still have a lot to do. Roll on Indianapolis.....

19th June 2005 - Pyrrhic Indeed

As usual, ITV introduced their Formula 1 coverage with loud rock music, and as this was the American Grand Prix, they played some American rock music by Green Day. Specifically, they played one of their latest songs, *American Idiot*. Nice to see that ITV are doing their best for transatlantic relations. But it wasn't American idiocy that caused the problems for the race – the Europeans were more than capable of screwing it all up on their own.

The race was a farce – it was a shambles, a fiasco, a travesty, a circus, a sham, a mockery, a charade of a race, an embarrassment, a disgrace, full of raillery and doggerel, and a caricature of what it all should be. As is usual these days, it all came down to tyres. The Indianapolis track had been resurfaced over the winter, but the drivers for the Indianapolis 500 complained that the track now lacked grip. So to get that race underway, Indianapolis used diamond tipped grinders to wear away the surface and increase the grip. That was fine for the cars of the Indy Racing League, but the increased grip meant that the tyres would wear faster. Now, IRL cars run on Firestone tyres, and Firestone is owned by Bridgestone. This meant that Bridgestone knew of the changes, but Michelin didn't.

It also seems that there was a manufacturing fault back in the Michelin factory, which caused the left rear tyres to generate far too much heat when under load on the Indianapolis banking. Michelin suffered 11 failures before the race even started. Some were partial failures which were only uncovered when the cars returned to the pits. However, Toyota suffered two explosive failures which completely destroyed the tyres, one pitching Ralf Schumacher into the same wall that he hit last year, resulting in his hospitalisation. Something had to be done, as Michelin realised that the teams couldn't complete anything like a race distance on one set of tyres. The question was what?

Michelin had two suggestions. One was that it be allowed to fly in some more tyres from France. These might have had the same fault – Michelin didn't know – but they were different and might have done. This, though, would have broken at least five of the F1 rules, according to Charlie Whiting of the FIA. So, Michelin then requested that a chicane be added before the cars hit the banking in order to slow them down. This is where it gets particularly murky.

If you listen to Paul Stoddart of Minardi, 9 teams agreed to allow the chicane to be added, with one refusing – Ferrari. However, according to Ferrari, they were never asked either way and it was up to the FIA to say what was happening. The FIA weren't publicly saying anything. So the time counted down to the race, and no-one really knew what was going on. All of the cars made the grid, but as they came around off their warm-up lap, all of the Michelin shod cars peeled off and returned to their garages, leaving six cars on the grid: two Ferrari's, two Jordan's and two Minardi's. It would be one hell of a race! Guess who would win?

You couldn't blame Ferrari completely. After all, their tyres were OK, and they weren't facing any problems for the race. Why should they be penalised for getting it right? Even so, if they were the only team holding out against the insertion of a chicane, then they missed a chance to show that they could act for the good of the sport as a whole by going along with it. Instead, they have possibly highlighted again their self-interest. It was obvious that they were going to win the race, but any victory was going to be exceedingly hollow. If Michael Schumacher wins the championship this year, and does it by anything less than 10 points, then it will be a very tarnished championship indeed.

The race itself was actually a fight for the first half of the race, until Ferrari central rang up the drivers and told them to start racing. This was probably more of a case of Ferrari ensuring that both of their cars finished the race, rather than trying to fix it. Due to problems in the pits, Michael had fallen behind Rubens, although he had a couple more laps of fuel on board. The outcome of the race was then decided at the second stops – as Michael emerged from his stop, he was marginally behind Rubens heading into the first corner. He placed his car into the apex, and Rubens tried to be later on the brakes. They did avoid hitting each other, but only just – Barrichello shot off line and took a trip across the grass, rejoining in turn 3. From the chassis language over the next few corners, it seemed obvious that Barrichello was mightily browned off, and he set about closing the gap down again. Hence the big red telephone call. It was a shame, as it killed the last laps of the Grand Prix entirely – what else was there to look forward to?

The only positive from the race was the extra exposure for Minardi and Jordan, and the financial exposure that their sponsors got must have been manna from heaven. And they were both guaranteed to get championship points, which means that they will both get travel money for the next year, a big help to their small budgets. But there was at least some interest in finding out which order they would finish in.

The winner from this group was Thiago Monteiro, who finished third and thus got his first Formula 1 podium. In fact, he is the first Portuguese driver to get onto the World Championship F1 podium. When collecting his trophy on the podium, he couldn't be happier, and you had to feel a touch sorry for him for the circumstances. At least the crowd booed far less when he was celebrating than when either of the Ferrari drivers collected theirs.

Comment of the weekend though has to go to Martin Brundle. He was contemplating the podium celebration with James Allen, when he said "If Michael Schumacher goes onto the podium and does a victory leap, I'm going to personally go out there and punch him." How I was wishing that Michael Schumacher would do that jump, as I would have loved to see Brundle attempt it.

26th June 2005 - A Race of Aerodynamics

The French Grand Prix at Magny Cours, politics aside, showed all that was wrong with Formula 1 racing at the moment. It's nothing that should detract from Renault's achievement, as they have simply taken what they have been given and run with it, but the race was decided by aerodynamic efficiency. Put simply, the cars these days are too efficient, and at circuits where efficiency is at a premium, a lack of passing is the result. And that was what was seen at Magny Cours.

The Toyota is not quite amongst the top rung of F1 cars at the moment, but come qualifying, Jarno Trulli is able to wring its neck and extract a performance which is not really justified by the chassis, and as a result he was second on the grid. The car gets away from the startline well enough, but that is where the problems then come – it isn't quite fast enough in race trim. Couple this with the excellent Renault start system, and what you have is a Renault scampering away at the front in clean air, its aerodynamics unencumbered, while the rest of the field is backed up by a mobile road block. All of the cars behind Trulli were all spaced roughly 0.8s apart, and none of them could do anything about the others in front of them. You had to have a far faster car to be capable of overtaking, or do it in a pit-stop. It is in danger of destroying racing as we know it.

The FIA seem to recognise this in their own inimitable way, but are only proposing a 10% cut in aerodynamic efficiency for next year. This isn't enough – the teams are more than capable of gaining more than this over the course of a year. What is needed is a change in the regulations to completely remove the dependency on wing generated downforce. The FIA should hire its own wind-tunnel, and investigate under-car aerodynamics.

Under car aerodynamics work by accelerating the air underneath the car – the accelerated air lowers the air pressure, thus creating the downward force on the car as a partial vacuum is created between the bottom of the car and the road surface. This was notoriously exploited by the ground effect cars of the early 1980s, where sliding skirts were used to seal the sides of the car with the road, while the entire underbody of the car was shaped like a venturi tunnel to generate downforce. The amount of downforce generated was huge, so the FIA sensibly at the time ruled that the cars must have flat bottoms, to remove most of the venturi effect. The downforce being generated at the time was enough that in the corners, some of the drivers were on the verge of black-outs due to the g-forces being pulled. However, in removing the bottom of the car from the downforce equation, it made the wings more important. The problem is that wings need clean air to work at their most efficient, and clean air is what you don't have when following another car.

The FIA should take a look at changing the rulebook to allow a limited degree of contouring beneath the car to generate more downforce. If this proves to allow too much freedom for the engineers, then the FIA could always mandate an exact shape of car bottom from the middle of the car backwards so that generated loads don't get too high. What ever they decide, something has to be done about the wings, otherwise Grand Prix Racing is what we won't see.

What was worthy of note in the Grand Prix was the performance of Kimi Räikkönen, who qualified 13th after being penalised 10 places on the grid after an engine blow-up in practice. His qualifying time was only 0.3s slower than Alonso's, but he was carrying many laps more fuel, so it puts his performance into perspective. He bided his time, put in the laps during his clear air time, and worked his way up to second. And third, the only unlapped driver, was Michael Schumacher. Perhaps this grid was an omen – the three best drivers on the grid were on the podium, but note the order. This could be the sign of things to come, the defining moment of careers. But I've been plenty wrong before.....

10th July 2005 - The British GP – Magny Cours Replayed

The British Grand Prix was the French Grand Prix replayed, just on a different track. The race was yet again decided by aerodynamics, with Trulli holding up Schumacher and the recovering Räikkönen, who again had a ten place grid penalty for an engine letting go in practice. The main difference was that the teams had better reliability this time. Montoya's McLaren held together, so having overtaken Alonso at the first corner, he stayed there, and so did Fisichella's Renault (he finished fourth). This meant that the Ferrari's looked even worse than normal, and that the potential finishing positions for BAR were that much lower.

If the cars hold together, the finishing positions are being decided by the speed of the cars. The McLaren's are a touch faster than the Renault's, but are hampered by a propensity for blowing engines in practice, and by the odd red-mist moment for Montoya. The Renault's are the best of the rest, but keep having niggling pit-stop issues with Fisichella.

Next up are probably BAR. On a one-lap shoot-out, Toyota can match them, but they have a far more consistently fast race pace. Toyota are a bit of an enigma – Trulli can wring the cars last ounce of performance during qualifying, and drags the car up the grid into places it has no right to be. But come the race, he ends up being a mobile chicane, to the extent that fuel strategy for the other teams is often decided by trying to work out where Trulli is likely to be and then fuelling accordingly.

Next up are Ferrari, the major disappointment of the season, which is just as well as it has allowed us to see racing between the other teams. It also seems as though the lack of performance has disheartened Michael Schumacher, as you are no longer seeing the kind of performance where he transcends the car. This was demonstrated clearly in today's race, where he was no faster than Barrichello, and by his mistakes in qualifying – it's almost as though he is throwing in the towel. The weekend's performance will only increase the speculation about when he plans to retire.

Next? I can't really make a clear break between Sauber and Red Bull – it depends on the circuit and the weekend, and their performances are fairly equal. Now that Villeneuve is getting a handle on his car, he is putting in some fighting drives, and his battles with Coulthard over the past couple of races have shown that both still have something to offer. What was more noticeable in this race was Massa – or rather, he was so invisible during the race that you almost didn't know that he was there. Massa is something of an enigma – he can put in some storming performances, and yet..... Now that Sauber has been bought by BMW, his position has to be at risk for next year, but there doesn't seem to be many other berths for him to take. Mind you, Villeneuve is probably in the same position, as I can't see his image suiting BMW very much.

The most noteworthy performance of the weekend has to be that of *Daily Express* journalist Bob McKenzie, who said on BBC Radio Five Live at the beginning of 2004 that if McLaren would win a race that year, he would run around Silverstone naked. It just so happened that Kimi Räikkönen won the Belgian Grand Prix, and Bernie Ecclestone and Ron Dennis held McKenzie to his word. So, dressed up in body paint in McLaren colours, and with a strategically placed sporran, he jogged his way around the track in the full glare of the exceedingly hot sun. There had been a vote on McLaren's website as to whether he should do the run naked or clothed, but there were sufficient donations made to a children's charity by the fans that a naked run it was. Beware the power of words.....

24th July 2005 - Hockenheim – Aero again

I felt sorry for the German TV director for this race, as it was obvious that he (I assume that it was a he) didn't know quite what to do. For the first time in years, his job wasn't automatic, as Michael Schumacher and his Ferrari wasn't leading, and wasn't looking likely to either. Plan B was obviously to follow anything that was German, and as long as the McLaren of Räikkönen was leading and setting fastest laps, then the decision to make was obvious. However, when Räikkönen's engine went up in a cloud of hydraulic smoke, there was a dilemma to face – what to show now? The director seemed to panic, and as a result missed most of the passing action first time around, much to the annoyance of the viewer who had to rely on replays.

The race itself was anticlimactic – it promised lots of action and exciting racing, but it somehow managed to never quite deliver. There was a case of dodgems at the first and second corners of the first lap, but after that the race split up into groups. Montoya was doing his best to bridge them, having started from the back of the grid due to throwing his car at the scenery in qualifying, but once he hit the faster groups he was stuck again, a legacy of the aerodynamic rules again. Here we were at a track where overtaking was possible, yet they couldn't manage it due to the inability of the cars to follow each other anywhere remotely near to closely through the corners. It was frustrating for the viewers, and frustrating for the drivers, as evidenced through some increasingly ragged driving by following drivers.

The only thing which seemed to enable overtaking was tyre degradation, which afflicted both of the Ferrari's. To try and make a race of things, Michael Schumacher had gone for a softer Bridgestone tyre, but this was being heavily worn out as the race progressed, and was obviously losing grip. This meant that even the aero deficiency wasn't enough to stop cars from having a go. Jenson Button was the first to take advantage of this, and put a good move up the inside into the hairpin, much to the delight of his mechanics. The next to actually attempt to overtake was Fisichella, but he was far more tentative. He had a much greater car superiority, but when watching him think it over you were never quite sure that he would eventually get there. He did, but it wasn't a convincing display. He may have had poor reliability this season, but he is in a car which is leading the drivers championship quite convincingly, and he's not. He is reinforcing his image of being a good number 2 driver who can occasionally deliver a number 1 performance, and should the next bright young thing show up, his days might be numbered.

So Alonso won yet again, and seems to have the championship sewn up bar a sequence of catastrophic car failures. The car is fast, yet not quite fast enough – the McLaren outpaces it when it holds together. Montoya was second, with Button third. Button himself was predicting a fourth placed finish before the race, and had Räikkönen not blown up, he would have been right. The BAR is missing that little bit which would take it to the Renault's and the McLaren's during the race, although over a single lap it isn't that far off, as evidenced by Button being second on the grid for two races in succession. The problem is that they don't look able to close the gap either, as they are only developing the car as fast as the others, not faster. Podiums for BAR in the next few races will depend on others falling out.

For excitement, viewers in the UK could switch over from ITV at the end of the Grand Prix to BBC2 to watch the motorcycles at the British Grand Prix at Donington Park. The race was somewhat wet, but what a race – there was overtaking, there were crashes, and there was a lack of aerodynamic problems. The series may be being dominated by Valentino Rossi on his Yamaha, but the races are still interesting – there was none of the sleep inducement which was prevalent when Ferrari were winning. There are none of the team orders either, as Rossi doesn't need them – he is good enough to do it himself, and knows it too. Formula 1, please take note. Moto GP isn't politically self destructing either.

31st July 2005 - Red Bull Gives You Wings

Red Bull – it gives you wings according to the adverts. Exactly – Klien tried flying and came down to earth with a bump, while Coulthard tried collecting them instead. Neither strategy really worked. Klien proved the strength of the rollbars, while Coulthard found that two sets of wings into one won't go, and removed his in sympathy, together with his front wheels. And this was just the first lap.

The problems all stemmed from the first corner concertina effect. The Hungaroring this year features a medium length straight leading into what is almost a hairpin, and a variety of starts and fuel strategies meant that there were various cars arriving at various speeds and at various angles of attacks into the first corner. Somehow, for most of this season the drivers haven't really tripped each other up much at the first corner, but they more than made up for it this time. As all of the cars concertinaed together, Villeneuve's left front interlocked with the wheels of Klien, who rode up over it, rolling right over. He bounced off the roll-over hoop and somehow missed everyone else, shedding bits as he went.

Alonso had made a mistake and was starting well down the grid, so he was trying to make the best of it at the first corner. He dived down the inside of Ralf Schumacher on the edge of the circuit, but Ralf in turn was diving down the inside of someone else. Ralf had to move right to avoid the car to his left, forcing Alonso on to the kerbs. He almost avoided contact, but as he backed off on the kerbs at the apex, Ralf's right rear brushed the edge of his front wing, breaking the uprights holding it onto the nose. The question was how long would it hold up.

About half a lap. Going down a straight, Alonso's wing flew up in the air, shattering into many pieces, but with the middle section largely intact. The cars behind dived left and right in avoidance as the remains bounced down the track, but inevitably there was one car that was unsighted, and this was David Coulthard. The car in front of him jinked out of the way at the last moment, and Coulthard had nowhere to go. The wing and nose cone ripped off Coulthard's front wing and right front tyre, and as he span out, he was lucky not to collect anyone else. Alonso headed to the pits and out of the points. It made the championship look at once a lot more interesting.

Although Michael Schumacher was leading the race, there was a look of inevitability surrounding the following McLaren's. They looked faster, as if they somehow had something in reserve, and all three were pulling away from the rest of the field. Rather than risk an overtaking manoeuvre, McLaren decided to pull Räikkönen into the pits early, and do it all on strategy. It obviously worked, but it is still an indictment of modern F1. I'd like to see Räikkönen win a race by actually overtaking Michael Schumacher and proving himself to be a superior racer, rather than by simply lapping faster on a clear circuit.

An interesting thing to note was the performance of the Bridgestone tyres again. They seem to have solved their single lap performance issues, so are better in qualifying, but in doing so they seem to have lost their durability. As a result, once the race goes beyond half distance, the Ferrari's seem to go slower and slower. They still have a lot to work on.

So, with Räikkönen finishing first, and Alonso not scoring, the championship points gap has been closed to 26 points, still a lot, but not the absolute mountain of a gap that there was before. McLaren and Championship watchers might also take heart from the total Renault performance, as Fisichella also showed a tendency to throw it off the road, while Alonso never seemed to have the speed anyway. A momentary aberration, or the start of something more serious? The next race is at the new circuit in Turkey, at which no-one will have any experience, so if it is something bigger, it will be harder to claw it back, as there will be no data to compare it to.

Jenson Button didn't do too badly with a fifth place, but it was nothing spectacular, and of more interest to the press was his contractual position next year. As far as I can see, the situation is cut and dried – he has a valid contract with Williams, and there is nothing that he can do about it. However, the more Machiavellian amongst you might like to look a little bit deeper into the undercurrents and discern a cunning plan by Williams to extract cash and Honda engines for next year, or at least an effort to unbalance BAR further, removing their focus from the task in hand. This will rumble on for some time to come.

21st August 2005 - When is a Tilkedrome not a Tilkedrome?

To answer the question in the title, the answer is when it is the Istanbul Speedpark, the latest design by Hermann Tilke for the Turkish Grand Prix. Previous designs include Sepang in Malaysia, Sakhir in Dubai, and the new Shanghai track. But what really made this track stand out was one thing: elevation.

There was gradient, and lots of it, and the use of gradient in corners helped to counteract some of the problems introduced by car aerodynamics, helping them run closer together than they might otherwise have done. It also made corners more tricky, as evidenced by the number of drivers who went wide at turns 8, 9 and 10. For once, Tilke deserves some plaudits, rather than the usual brickbats which are thrown his way. Perhaps he has a racing heart after all, although the Turks themselves helped out by allowing the choice of location.

The race itself was gripping too, with overtaking, cars moving through the field, tactics, and arrogance. Once again the McLaren's proved themselves to be the class of the field, with Räikkönen leading by the end of lap 1, and thereafter never being headed. Montoya backed this up with third place and fastest lap, but was hampered by Monteiro removing his rear diffuser during a Portuguese faux pas. Renault just don't have the out and out pace to compete – they have to rely on the misfortune of McLaren, and the fact that Alonso can still win the championship if he finishes third in every race here on in. So, the championship is Renault's to lose, but it is looking more and more difficult for them.

Williams had a hard time of it in the race, suffering a spate of right rear tyre failures. The failures were sudden and catastrophic, with the tyre seeming to let go of the rim when braking from high speed. Webber suffered a failure early in the race at the beginning of the lap, and he took an age bringing his car back to the pits while trying not to break anything further. He was a lap down on everyone, but when on track did his best to try and move forwards as much as possible. However, when he caught up with Michael Schumacher, who was already having a bad day in the car courtesy of a lack of grip from the tyres, the problems really began.

For some reason, Schumacher decided he would defend his place on the track. Webber attempted to drive around the outside of him as they headed towards a left hand corner, so Schumacher drove across him and forced him to back off slightly. Webber then immediately jinked left and attempted to dive down the inside. He got more than half way alongside, but Schumacher seemingly didn't bother looking and drove across the Williams, with the inevitable contact. Webber's front wing was removed, and Schumacher's suspension was damaged. Both limped back to the pits.

Ferrari repaired Schumacher's suspension, taking 17 laps, so that he could gain a few positions for qualifying at the next Grand Prix in Monza, but having moved up as far as he could he quit the race. He then faced the reporters.

"I don't know why he did it," said Schumacher. "He was one lap down, and he was never going to make it up." So, if Schumacher knew that Webber was a lap down, why on earth was he attempting to block him? If Webber wanted to go by, he could have simply pulled out of the way and let him get on with it, as he was never going to be a threat to Schumacher's race position. And why shouldn't Webber attempt to close up to those in front? Even if he only managed to overtake the Jordan's and Minardi's, that was still four positions better for his next qualifying. It simply belies the inherent arrogance of the man, and his belief that no-one should overtake him. The FIA frequently throw the rule book at "lesser" drivers for causing "avoidable accidents", and this was certainly avoidable, but will any form of censure come from this? I doubt it. Just to make things better, after going back out of track the first time to prove that his suspension really was broken, Schumacher managed to force Fisichella off the road under braking.

Webber went back out again, but suffered a second failure, and after Heidfeld suffered his second failure, both of the Williams' were retired, as it was considered too dangerous for them to continue, and you had to agree – both had been lucky not to collect anyone else when the tyres failed. It would seem though that the problem has to be with the Williams car itself, as none of the other Michelin teams suffered any problems.

One notable drive in the race was that of Jenson Button. Button qualified down in 13th place, having suffered a tank-slapper in qualifying which kyboshed his chances of a front row position, but more than made up for it during the race. He made quick work of the lower order, and by sticking in faster laps when necessary, managed to make it into 5th, best of the rest behind the Renault's and McLaren's. It was impressive the way that his car simply drove past the Ferrari's on the straight, and he also put in a couple of good overtaking manoeuvres. McLaren will be hoping for more of the same from Button without the qualifying mistakes, as on this form that is one more car which could get between Räikkönen and Alonso at the finish. And the more of them that there are, the better the chances of the championship battle going down to the wire. Bring on the Italian Grand Prix!

11th September 2005 - The Mists of the Ardennes

For the Belgian Grand Prix, the track was a little Bon Jovi, i.e. it was slippery when wet. The morning sessions had seen ample amounts of the wet stuff liberally coating the circuit, and the enveloping mists were clinging to the Ardennes trees. Indeed, it reminded you of British Summer Time.

What the weather did though is to throw the dice of chance. Qualifying had been dry, so the conditions threw up a whole new conundrum to solve. The track was damp, and the weather forecast indicated that there might be more rain on the way. On the other hand, as the race progressed, the racing line would dry out. The conditions cried out for compromise, but there were those who could afford to compromise more than others. With a healthy championship lead, Alonso could afford to take it easier – as long as he finished in the top four or so in the remaining races, the championship would be his. Räikkönen on the otherhand had to ensure that he would win. It was looking interesting.

Once the red lights went out, the two McLaren's, who were first and second on the grid, shot off into the lead and started to disappear, the Michelin intermediate tyre seemingly better suited to the conditions for McLaren. But it was Montoya who was leading Räikkönen, and how long would he stay in front. How would McLaren interpret the no team orders issue?

The first indications came around lap 10, when Fisichella lost control of his car in Raidillon – he disappeared at a high rate of speed backwards into the tyre barriers, at least keeping his car on the ground, unlike Villeneuve and Zonta in 2000. This necessitated the use of the safety car, so that the wrecked Renault and associated missing appendages could be craned off the circuit. Enough laps had also gone that pit-stops became a possibility – what should McLaren do?

Their solution was to have Montoya hurry back to the pits, while Räikkönen made his way there much more slowly. As the circuit was effectively under a full-course yellow, no-one could overtake him, so everyone had to play follow-my-leader and back up behind him. Räikkönen lapped sufficiently slowly that Montoya was already leaving his pit-box when Räikkönen was entering the pit entrance. Other teams took the cue, and Button did a similar exercise on the field to allow Sato to pit and get out of his way. This is an unintended consequence of the rules, but I can see little that the FIA can do about it. The FIA can't allow overtaking under yellow, as this would sanction a continuing of racing when the race is meant to be neutralised, and short of enforcing a speed at which everyone must run, there is nothing that can be done to prevent this. It's the usual case of F1 teams exploiting the rules to the full.

When racing resumed, Montoya resumed in the lead, from Ralf Schumacher (who had pitted the lap before the safety car had been scrambled) and Jacques Villeneuve (who hadn't pitted at all). Räikkönen was fourth. The question of how Räikkönen would overtake Montoya looked a little academic, but the situation resolved itself when Schumacher decided to pit for dry tyres (and then spun off at Les Combes – he had to pit again for new intermediates), and then Villeneuve had his pit-stop. Räikkönen then rapidly caught up to Montoya, who then pitted himself. Räikkönen banged in a lap two seconds faster than anyone else, so that when the pit-stops had run themselves out, he was leading. He was the untroubled to the flag.

As the races laps wound down (shorn of M.Schumacher and Sato after a contretemps under braking for La Source), it dried out more and more, and a few hardy souls started to brave going out on dry tyres, which created an interesting situation as there were now cars of wildly differing speeds lapping together. Interestingly, Jenson Button, who had the opportunity to switch to dry tyres, stuck with his intermediates, as he felt that as they were wearing down they were giving him more grip. This seemed to be borne out by his lap times, as he was catching Alonso at 4 seconds per lap. Both of the Williams went to dry tyres, and it was this that set up the final throw of the dice of fate. Pizzonia was lapping far faster than Montoya, and he decided to try an unlap himself. What exactly happened isn't clear from the video footage, but the end result was that Montoya clipped Pizzonia, and both were out, thus gifting Alonso an extra two points for the second race in succession, and denying yet another McLaren 1-2. Mathematically, Räikkönen, who won the race, can still win the championship, but slips like this by others in his team are making it all the more difficult.

And finally

Earlier this summer, a Porsche driver in Germany had the shock of his life when a light aircraft landed on top of his car while he was driving at speed around a former US airbase near Bitburg in Germany. The plane somehow came to rest on the roof, but the shocked car driver then slammed on his brakes, and the plane was flung forward nose first on to the tarmac. It is reported that the Bitburg police were considering filing charges of negligence against the pilot.

25th September 2005 - Interlagos – upmarket environs my arse!

You have to hand it to James Allen, he does make you laugh, as well as make you wonder if he actually looks outside of his Formula 1 life. He claimed that the Interlagos track, which is within the city of São Paulo, is within a richer area of the city. Richer, in that it isn't actually in the middle of a *favela* (the local name for a shanty town), perhaps, but perhaps Allen should take a walk outside of the circuit once the race finishes.

The circuit itself is actually one of the better tracks to spectate at, and if you can get a seat towards the beginning of the main straight on the concrete uncovered seating areas, you can see a good two thirds of the circuit, and actually watch most of the action. The crowds are friendly, and a very enjoyable day can be had. However, outside of the circuit the conditions are slightly different.

I went there in 1998, and once the race was over, I walked down the Rua Carlos Pace to meet my friend who was picking me up. It was a nice and sunny day, so I sat down by the roadside and waited. A street cleaner made his way down the road, and spoke to me. I struggled to understand, as I could only reply in a very bad mixture of Spanish with the odd word of Portuguese thrown in. It was obvious that I was foreign, and he pointed to his watch. He said in Portuguese that by 5 pm, the area was very bad, and I should leave, even if my friend hadn't turned up. He said it twice just to make sure that I understood. Luckily, my friend turned up half an hour before the suggested vacation time, so I never saw the full Interlagos night-time experience. It should also be remembered that São Paulo has one of the highest murder rates in the world.

The race itself was a touch anticlimactic, with a sense of inevitability becoming palpable from half way around the first lap. Räikkönen had worked his way past Fisichella, and was sat behind a feisty Montoya. Alonso was in third, and not really being threatened by the following Michael Schumacher. And there it remained for the rest of the race, differing fuel strategies notwithstanding. Alonso didn't need to win – third would be good enough, no matter where Räikkönen finished. Hence McLaren didn't need to choreograph the race, and Montoya could be allowed to win if he stayed ahead. And he did – indeed, he looked the better at the end of the race, as Räikkönen's neck was giving out, and he was having to lean against the headrest in the larger corners, the anti-clockwise circuit proving more arduous than the usual clockwise circuits that are raced on.

So Alonso was crowned World Champion, beating Emerson Fittipaldi's record of being the youngest Formula 1 World Champion ever. But did he deserve it, or did he luck into it?

On the face of it, Alonso lucked into it, as Räikkönen has lost many a race this year through mechanical breakdown. The McLaren reliability has been much worse than the Renault reliability, but then McLaren are leading the constructors' championship following the Brazilian Grand Prix. Montoya has been doing a far better job than Fisichella of finishing in the points, as McLaren's reliability issues have been fairly evenly spread around, compared to Renault where they seem to have been exclusively centred on Fisichella. And at least one of those failures for Räikkönen was caused by driver error, the flat spot at the Nürburgring having caused the suspension failure. Alonso though also exited one race through driver error, hitting the wall at Canada. So honours even.

So, from a seasons perspective, there hasn't been much to prove between the two when it comes to mistakes, and both drivers have put in strong drives. Due to the change in car performance and reliability over the season, we've never really seen them fight either, as when the McLaren gained its performance, Alonso was already thinking of gathering points and avoiding accidents. So did he deserve it? On balance, he probably did. His performances haven't been any worse than Räikkönen's, and Renault did a better job over the year. However, it would be interesting to see what he would really do when held under sustained pressure. He did a good job in repelling Michael Schumacher at Imola, but then Schumacher wasn't threatening his championship. That is when we will really see whether he has the ability to make that step from one time champion to multiple champion.

What the season does prove is the ridiculousness of the scoring system, which puts such a premium on finishing over winning. Given that there are only two points between 1st and 2nd places, if a driver fails to finish, he would have to win the next five races if the other driver finished 2nd all of the time in order to draw level. It defeats the idea of drivers fighting to win, if you can ensure a championship through finishing second. This new points system was brought in due to Michael Schumacher's dominance in his Ferrari, to try and ensure that the championship would take longer to be decided. But the problem then was that the Ferrari was technically superior to everything else, and this points manipulation enabled the FIA to maintain the fiction that the championship was still being fought for. Now that the championship is being fought over properly, the artificiality of the situation is shown in stark relief – we now have a NASCAR style championship which rewards consistency rather than winning. The sooner that the points scheme reverts back to what it was, the better.

9th October 2005 - Accelerated life

The entire grand prix weekend can be summed up as a case of accelerated life. It was conceived on Friday, with the early days being seemingly normal. The first trimester came and went with the usual teams heading up the sheets, and the second trimester was very much the same, although with one or two minor worries along the way, such as Räikkönen losing an engine again. However, the gestation during the third trimester (aka qualifying) became a mite more difficult.

The problem was that rain was forecast to arrive during the qualifying session, and it would seem that Japanese weather forecasters are a lot more accurate than the lot we've had to deal with so far this season. Rain did arrive, and it got progressively more heavy. Thus if you qualified early on in the session, you got a good grid position, hence the sight of Minardi's and Jordan's threatening the top 10 on the grid. If you were in a Renault or a McLaren, things looked much worse – the state of the track meant that they were only ever going to qualify at the back. At least Räikkönen's 10 place penalty wasn't going to make much difference.

And so to the birth, and the start of the race. Ralf Schumacher's Toyota showed some early precociousness, starting from pole and getting away first, but it rapidly became obvious that this was due to a case of doping – he had been fuelled exceedingly light, and had to pit early for fuel. It would seem that Toyota were desperate for the publicity of being on pole in their home grand prix of Japan. However, they are a case of all mouth and no trousers, and all they managed to do was prove that they aren't yet ready to race with the big boys, and are wannabe racers.

The first few laps were a case of grand prix in the nursery, with elementary mistakes being made left, right and centre, and with the supervising adults (aka the FIA) seemingly so taken by the behaviour that they felt it necessary to join in the silliness too. Takuma Sato, one of those pupils who promised much early, but never quite manages to pass the year and has to retake it each time, ran too hot into the first corner, and ran wide. Barrichello seemingly had a sympathy moment, and ran wide as well, although later in the corner. As young Taku tried to regain the circuit, Barrichello flew past and tapped his right front; this punctured Barrichello's left rear, and broke part of Taku's wing. Both managed to escape their sand-pits of potential doom and regain the circuit, and both hobbled back towards their respective pits, looking lost for the day. But their salvation was yet to come.

Cars were nerfing each other at every corner, any sense of restraint or self-control seemed to go out of the window (where's a Collina when you want one? No-one messed around when he was refereeing football matches, or if they did, they didn't last very long). Coming out of the fast 190R and into the chicane for the first time, it was obvious that someone was going to get hurt. Cars headed into the breaking zone spread out across the track, but there is only one line through the corner, and several speared off across the Astroturf. Montoya went through the chicane, only to find Villeneuve rejoining the track in front of him. He jinked left to avoid him, but Villeneuve then kept moving over. With nowhere to go on the track, Montoya was edged onto the grass and into the tyre barrier with some force, ripping off the left hand side of the car. Cue the safety car, and several laps of gentle tootling while the marshals cleaned up the nappies, which gave the drivers an opportunity to calm down and grow up a little.

The safety car situation was a godsend for those faster drivers who started from the back, as it brought the leaders back towards them. It also bred a little impatience, as those faster drivers wanted to make it forward at a faster rate. Coming into the chicane again, Alonso tried outbraking Klien, but Klien held his line and forced Alonso to go across the grass. Alonso rejoined the track ahead, and backed off to allow Klien past again. However, he didn't back off that much, and he then used the slipstream of the Red Bull to get past at the end of the straight. Alonso then motored off to hassle Michael Schumacher's Ferrari.

Then the moment of FIA silliness. The FIA said that Alonso had to let Klien past him again for an unfair advantage, and we all assumed it was because he had done the slipstream to Klien and got an advantage that way. So Alonso backed off, lost the five seconds he had gained chasing Schumacher to let Klien past. He then took a lap or two about passing Klien for a second time, but this time made it stick more fairly. Upon which the FIA said sorry, we got it wrong, and it was all a miscommunication.

Yeah, right. So what are they going to do about it? If a team makes a miscommunication or mistake and gets it wrong, they can be penalised, thrown out of a race, banned for a number of races, or any number of such permutations, but the FIA? No doubt they won't mention it again, or change any of their procedures. It would be nice if they showed some humility and openness on this subject, so that we can be sure that they won't "miscommunicate" again in future. It has to be especially embarrassing given that the FIA couldn't have been watching the TV coverage of their own event.

Once out of the nursery stages, the drivers breezed through primary school and on into secondary school. This is where star pupils Räikkönen and Alonso demonstrated that they had finally learned the art of overtaking, although Räikkönen seemed to take a little longer in his education than Alonso. Alonso pulled a breathtaking manoeuvre into 130R on Michael Schumacher, leaving no doubt who he thought owned the track. Räikkönen on the otherhand didn't look like he would make it, until he overcame his nerves and had a pit-stop for fuel. Coming back out on track, he overtook Schumacher into turn one, and never looked back. The seven ages of a grand prix weekend were rapidly moving onwards.

The middle ages of the race were calm affairs, with drivers catching each other and playing cat and mouse. Sato had a mid-life crisis though, and dived up the inside of Trulli into the chicane in a desperate attempt to demonstrate that there was still a benefit to someone if they would only employ him next year. Contact was made, and on interview Trulli held no punches when saying what he thought. He shouldn't be on the track was his opinion. Harsh perhaps, but unfortunately it is increasingly looking like being true.

The laps counted down, and Räikkönen was chasing down the lead Renault of Fisichella. As the race headed into its dotage, Fisichella looked like he needed a walking stick, whereas Räikkönen was looking spry and alert. If recent medical announcements are correct, perhaps it was all of the mid-race activity for Räikkönen which was keeping him more mentally alert as the race aged. There was a sense of inevitability about it. Lap by lap the gap between the two came down by more than a second, and Fisichella went prematurely defensive, taking defensive lines when Räikkönen wouldn't have been close enough to take advantage anyway. Coming into the chicane for the penultimate time, Fisichella again went prematurely defensive, and it compromised his speed onto the main straight. Räikkönen needed no second invitation, and ran around the outside into turn 1. It was game over, an unlikely McLaren win.

As the race weekend died its death, Renault could at least take away some satisfaction in now being two points ahead in the constructors' championship, rather than two points behind. For McLaren, there was the pleasure in winning under adverse conditions, so much so that Ron Dennis almost choked up under interview. But Grand Prix racing undergoes reincarnation, and it will be reborn again next week in China. Let's hope that the upcoming nursery stage will be better behaved than this one.

16th October 2005 - Drained

The constructors' championship was decided by an unlocked manhole cover, not the first time that these have afflicted motorsport. They seem to be a particular problem in China, and have become more of a problem since undercar aerodynamics discovered ground effect. Ground effect sucks the car downwards by creating a low pressure area underneath the car. The corollary of this is that the cars also suck anything on the track surface upwards if they run over it, and any manhole covers which are not fastened down get sucked out of the ground. To get around this in Monaco, they weld the covers in place for each race weekend.

The danger of this situation was graphically demonstrated in a World Sportscar race at Montreal in 1990, when one of the manhole covers became dislodged, as it hadn't been welded in. Kenny Acheson's Nissan R90C hit part of it, as did the Spice SE90C of Fermin Velez, but without any problem. Following them was Denis Moran in a Cougar-Porsche C24S, which hit the manhole full on. The cars' underbody aerodynamics flicked up the cover, and sent it backwards and upwards.

Following behind was the Brun Porsche 962C of Jesus Pareja, and the manhole cover went through his windscreen, luckily on the "passenger" side of the car, while simultaneously another piece of debris ripped a hole in the bottom of the chassis. The combined effect of being ripped apart top and bottom ruptured the fuel tank, and the car ignited in a sheet of flame. The car then slammed into a wall, taking another Brun Porsche (that of Harald Huysman) with it. Everyone expected the worse, and Harri Toivonen, having stopped his car, ran to the stricken Porsche with Moran and Huysman, but Pareja got out dazed, but otherwise unhurt.

Although racing has taken part at Zhuhai in China for several years, to try and promote the upcoming Formula 1 race at Shanghai in 2004, a non-championship street race was held for the Deutsch Tourenwagen Meisterschaft series (German touring cars) in the Pudong region of Shanghai. Qualifying went well, but the first race had to be abandoned after a manhole cover was sucked up and punctured the floor of Bernd Märty's Mercedes (who is now the safety car driver for F1), and caused him to have a big accident. Racing was delayed for many hours while the track crew welded up every available track orifice, so that race 2 could eventually get underway.

And so to the Grand Prix. According to Herman Tilke, interviewed on ITV, there are locks on all of the drainage covers which should prevent this happening, and one of them was simply not locked properly. Thus one of them got lifted up, and although Fisichella and Räikkönen managed to miss it, the following Montoya who went slightly wider could not. It punctured his tyre, and punched a hole through the right front side of his chassis, taking the radiator and associated pipe work with it. The engine gradually pumped out its coolant, and eventually expired, taking McLaren's chances of the manufacturers championship with it. I'd be interested to know what the liability laws are like in China, and whether McLaren could recoup the cost of a damaged chassis from the circuit due to their negligence.

If McLaren went out with a bang, Ferrari ended the year with a whimper, Schumacher having an accident before the race even started. Desperate to save fuel, Schumacher crawled around the circuit on his way from the pit to the grid. Christijan Albers in his Minardi on the other hand was doing his lap at much nearer race pace, using it as an installation lap. There was thus a large speed difference when the Minardi came upon the dawdling Ferrari. Albers decided to pass on the left-hand side, just as Schumacher decided to go left to get out of his way. Albers creamed into the Ferrari's sidepod, being launched into the air, and removing the Ferrari's left front wheel. Both cars were out, but both drivers were able to start the race in spare cars, Schumacher receiving an official reprimand from the FIA. Coulthard also admitted to a couple of close calls on his lap as well. Perhaps some kind of minimum speed limit needs to be enforced on the installation lap to avoid such collisions in future. Schumacher eventually span out when under safety car conditions, low tyre temperatures and pressures catching him out as he disappeared into a gravel trap backwards. Barrichello also had a weak race, stopping to have a flat spotted tyre replaced and finishing up in 12th, the last unlappped runner.

So Renault saw out the year with Alonso as race winner and world champion, and with themselves as constructors' champions. Alonso had started from pole, and with Fisichella acting as rear-gunner, he

was able to motor into the distance, two sets of safety car periods notwithstanding. Fisichella overcooked his role at one point, backing the cars up too much under the safety car as he came into the pits. Following McLaren's actions at Spa, the FIA brought in a rule which says that drivers must stay within 5 car lengths of the car ahead when under safety car conditions, and Fisichella was much further back than this. He received a drive-through penalty, which meant he missed out on a podium. But Renault didn't care, he had protected Alonso's position, and they were well clear in the championship standings.

What was noticeable when viewing the camera shots was the air quality, with a white haze in the air seriously affecting visibility, and it was especially noticeable on the long kilometre straight. Was it a result of pollution, or simple atmospheric? Whichever it was, the juxtaposition made for uncomfortable viewing for F1, and for what can be seen as one of the most polluting of sports racing in one of the most polluting and ecologically damaged countries. Formula 1 is all about image, and using its image to enhance carefully managed brands. It would only take one well conceived environmental protest to highlight what their brands are truly being associated with, and the resultant loss of sponsorship could be catastrophic. Let's take this as an early warning of what might be.