

12th March 2006 - The Best and Worst of F1

The Gulf Air Bahrain Grand Prix, the first Grand Prix of the season, and a change from the usual Australia of recent years, showed what was best and worst about F1. We had closely matched teams, we had rookie drivers setting the fastest lap of the race and demonstrating that they were there on talent alone rather than name, and we had overtaking. So what was wrong? Well, we never actually saw an overtake for the lead on the track. It didn't matter how close Alonso and Michael Schumacher got to each other, they never actually threatened to pass each other. Instead it was down to the usual tactics of fuelling slightly longer and having faster pit-stops. This is the worst of F1 – a driver winning the race without actually having to overtake someone, even if they didn't start from the front of the grid. I still feel that a race win is an incomplete race win if you managed to win when not starting on pole and when not overtaking those in front. Overtaking is the essence of racing, and is a fundamental art, yet it wasn't demonstrated at all by Alonso. Despite all of the changes over the winter, F1 still doesn't change its basic problems, and I'm sure that this will become more apparent over the course of the year, especially since tyre changes have been reintroduced.

What was impressive about the race was how close the four main teams were. Ferrari, McLaren, Renault and Honda were all very closely matched, with Williams not far off either. It bodes for a great year of racing, especially given that none of the lead teams retired during the race. However, Ferrari won't win the constructors championship this year, because new second driver Felipe Massa was, well, very Massa. He is very fast over a single lap, as demonstrated by the way he pushed Schumacher in qualifying and was only a few hundredths of a second behind, but he can't keep this speed up consistently during a race. After only a few laps Massa had already spun out and flat spotted his tyres, and following his pit stop he never again demonstrated the same pace. He'll surely score some points this year, but not with the same consistency as the second drivers in the other big teams, hence why Ferrari will struggle.

There were two drives in particular which stood out – those of Kimi Räikkönen and Nico Rosberg. Räikkönen had suffered a suspension failure in practice, and started from the back of the grid. Fuelled up to the gills with fuel, he looked to be in for a long afternoon, but no-one seemed to have told Räikkönen. He rapidly progressed to eleventh, but got stuck behind the BMW of Villeneuve, and there he appeared to be stuck. However, he was on a one stop strategy, and as the cars in front of him peeled off into the pits, he floated up the order, and he was no slower than the leaders. He finished an eventual third, ahead of his team-mate Montoya who was in fifth. Montoya never looked like being in the same race, and was somewhat off colour. He will need to pick up his game if he wishes to remain a McLaren driver next year, assuming that Räikkönen hasn't already signed for Ferrari.

The other drive of note was that of Nico Rosberg, son of 1982 champion Keke Rosberg. He was involved in some first corner contact which removed his front wing, and the initial thought was that his debut grand prix was effectively over due to a rookie mistake. Instead, he turned the race into a demonstration of what he could do, and he set about getting as high up the order as he possibly could, along the way setting the fastest lap of the race, overtaking several cars, and reaching seventh place. What it also demonstrated was how good the new Cosworth engine is, and considering that it is not backed by a major manufacturer, it has to be the best value engine on the grid.

Jenson Button also had a good race, although it was marred by a slow start, and pit-stops which always seemed to place him back in traffic. What it did allow Button to do was demonstrate his prowess in overtaking. He overtook his team-mate twice, and Montoya three times, each time demonstrating exquisite timing on the brakes into turn 1. If he drives like this throughout this season, a race win should surely come his way. He also demonstrated his intent by qualifying one second faster than his team-mate Rubens Barrichello, and by being generally faster than him until Barrichello was hampered by losing third gear. Perhaps this will help lay to rest the mutterings in the British press about his ability and the fact that he hasn't won a race despite starting 100 of them.

Curiously off the pace this weekend were the Toyota team. They are a big budget operation, and may well be the best funded team on the grid, yet they were racing outside of the top ten, never threatening, and only really racing each other. The effects of this were also seen in the mental state of Jarno Trulli, who seemingly gave up and willingly ceded his position to his team-mate. If Toyota don't sort out their

issues soon, then this could become a self-reinforcing spiral downwards, with dispirited drivers unable to dig the team out of a hole.

But as a taster for the rest of the season, it promised much, with the best three drivers finishing in the top three, and a number of others capable of being there on the right day. The technical changes over the winter have slowed the cars down, but the top teams are still the top teams, and they are still out at the front. It promises to be a great season, but please, lets have some overtaking for the lead.

19th March 2006 - Maladies in Malaysia

This is going to sound very much like a long playing record which is stuck in the same groove (see the last article), but consider the following: Fisichella started on pole, finished first, didn't overtake anyone. Alonso started seventh, overtook both of the Williams cars and Montoya at the start before the first corner, and then didn't overtake anyone. Button started second, dropped behind Montoya after a pit-stop, but didn't overtake anyone. Montoya finished fourth, and didn't overtake anyone. All of the top four relied on pit-stops and the mechanical failures of others to make their way into the finishing positions. This is meant to be Grand Prix *Racing* – there was precious little of that.

The race as a whole though was very much a pointer to the future, rather than the present. Consider the following – Felipe Massa, starting at the back of the grid, finished ahead of team-mate Michael Schumacher, who started fourteenth. Massa was his usual ragged self, locking his tyres several times as he fought his way forward. Schumacher though was strangely muted, and although he pulled off an aggressive overtake on Villeneuve, he didn't look like being quite his normal self. This race, coupled with his almost excessive happiness at finishing second in Bahrain is sure to set off a whole mountain of press speculation about his future. OK, he had a bad year in 2005, but when was the last time that Schumacher was happy with second? He would normally be searching for the best way to move that one place forward, pushing the team to not be happy with anything else than first. The press will take one look at his age and conclude that he is past it. Massa is fast, but not in Schumacher's class and should have been beaten. Schumacher needs to put in some more convincing displays than this to dispel the doubters and quieten the press. If he doesn't, Schumacher might find himself being invited to retire rather than leaving at a time of his choosing. After all, why pay tens of millions of dollars more for a driver who can't achieve a better result than the one you pay a single million or so for?

It wasn't just the Ferrari drivers who were a talking point this race – the Ferrari engines were too. Massa lunched two of them during practice and qualifying, and Schumacher destroyed one as well. Ferrari told the press that this was due to a bad batch of piston rings – shades of the 1970s and Cosworth, when they similarly had a bad batch of pistons and lost several engines. Thus Cosworth must have had a sense of *deja-vu* when both of the Williams' blew up. They may have a fast engine, but it seems somewhat marginal when the ambient temperature starts creeping upwards.

They weren't the only two manufacturers to suffer with the heat – Mercedes suffered badly as well, with McLaren having to compromise their downforce by cutting extra louvres into the top of their sidepods to facilitate the cooling. This compromised their top speed, and thus limited how far up the finishing positions they would get. For Räikkönen this was all academic, his right rear was hit by Christian Klien on the first lap, and he suffered a rapid suspension failure which put him off the circuit. For Montoya it made for a boring afternoon, never being threatened by those behind, and never being fast enough to worry those in front either. McLaren must hope that it is only a temperature induced problem – if not, they could be in for a very trying year.

A special mention has to go to the Super Aguri team. Despite having a four year old chassis which they modified in only a couple of months, they have only been a couple of seconds off the pace, and Sato has managed to finish both of the races. It will be interesting to see what they can do when the Grand Prix circus gets back to Europe and they debut their new chassis. One further point to ponder: how good is the Red Bull chassis? Consider that they have the same engine as the Ferrari team, and then consider their results. I bet that they can't wait to let Adrian Newey work his chassis magic.

2nd April 2006 - A Very Curious Crisis

At last we saw motor racing, with drivers having to overtake to win. And what a series of overtakes – Montoya driving around the outside of Button, Webber sticking strong moves on his contemporaries, and Alonso drafting Button. It more than made up for the point to point racing that made up the first two Grands Prix. Let's have more of the same please next time around.

Ferrari seem to be in a very curious crisis at the moment. They were suffering from a lack of speed all weekend, which meant that their drivers were pushing hard to overcome the problems, yet even given this their performance was somewhat extraordinary, with a degree of performance sometimes there, and sometimes not. I hesitate to use the term inexplicable to describe this, as with the degree of telemetry on the vehicles I'm sure that Ferrari have a very good idea about what the problem is, but if you are on the outside the performance in the Australia leaves you a little non-plussed.

Consider the early performance of Michael Schumacher – this is all we can do really, following Massa's attempts to gnaw off the rear of Klien's Red Bull and Rosberg's Williams. In the first half of the race he was mixing it with the Toro Rosso's of Vitantonio Liuzzi and Scott Speed, with Liuzzi putting a pass on Michael, and Speed following close behind. You might consider there to be a degree of mitigation involved, in that the rev-restricted V10's in the Toro Rosso's have better torque characteristics when accelerating out of the slow corners which predominate at Albert Park, yet even so Schumacher was *five* seconds slower per lap than race leader. Later though, when in clear air, he was able to catch the next driver by up to a second per lap. Go figure! As he pulled out these times and tried desperately to catch the next driver, he understeered wide onto the start straight, hit a bump in the grass and piled into the wall, spinning wildly across the track and shedding bodywork and tyres as he went. It was an ignominious end to a desperate race. At no point did the Ferrari look like being remotely competitive. This lack of competitiveness seems to be affecting the driving of Schumacher adversely, and his driving looks rattled, no matter what is quoted in the press about his off-track demeanour. It's a situation in which Schumacher has not been for several years, and it is to be seen how he will cope over the coming year. Much more of this and heads can be expected to roll within Ferrari.

Questions also have to be asked over the new rules regarding engines following the spectacular engine blow up to Jenson Button in the final corner of the final lap. The rules state that if you retire during a race, you can put a new engine in and not suffer a ten place penalty on the grid on the next place. If you do cross the finishing line, then even if your engine breaks on the slowing down lap, you get a ten place penalty on the grid. Button could have coasted across the line and finish in sixth position and got himself three drivers and manufacturers points, but instead he pulled over, stopped 30 metres before the finishing line, and finished 10th, one lap down and officially retired. Thus he sacrificed the three points, but doesn't suffer a penalty in the next race. This can't be what was intended by the FIA, and is an artificial end to what was a good effort. Gone are the days when a driver would get out of his car and push it across the line – why suffer the 10 place qualifying penalty if you do?

Another driver you have to feel a touch sorry for is Giancarlo Fisichella. He stalled on the first grid, necessitating a start from the pit-lane, and he made a reasonable job of working his way up the field. However, mid-race his chief engineer came on the radio to tell him that he had the same car as leader Alonso, the same tyres, the same set-up and the same strategy, so why was he two seconds a lap slower? This was broadcast to millions worldwide, and must have done absolute wonders for his drivers confidence. You can imagine the comments that he will get after the race as well. Up to the race itself, Fisichella had been very fast, out qualifying Alonso, so it was back to appalling luck as usual for Fisichella. Given that Alonso is the driver who is leaving at the end of the year, it is a wonderful piece of man management to be so brutal with Fisichella. He seems to be mentally fragile at the best of times, and beating him up is hardly the best way to extract the performances needed.

And so Alonso rolled on to yet another win, with Räikkönen second, and Ralf Schumacher a surprising third, having suffered a drive through penalty for pit-lane speeding but having made the best of four safety car periods. It is an indication of what Toyota might do. However, you need to bear in mind that he would have been nowhere near had it not been for the safety cars. They are spending an awful lot of money, and shouldn't be relying on such strokes of fortune to get the points. No doubt copious amounts of more yen will be flowing their way to move them still further up the grid.

23rd April 2006 - Bernie, All is Forgiven

The first race of the year to be held in Europe, and the first race which was televised by the host broadcaster and boy, did it show. Bernie, all is forgiven – please come back.

We may have had a race, but to be honest I couldn't really tell, as unless there was a Ferrari on the screen then the TV race director simply wasn't interested. He (I assume it was a he – women are generally better at multitasking) also couldn't get used to the idea of mixing in audio feed from the team radios either, and only finally plucked up the courage to experiment on the slowing down lap, when, you've guessed it, he played the Ferrari to Schumacher pit radio – over several replays of Ferrari moments.

The race threatened to be boiling up nicely until the pitstops, which removed Jenson Button from second position. His brakeman lifted the lollipop too early, so Button went, only for the brakeman to lower the lollipop and have Button collect it edge side on in his helmet. What was potentially worse was that the refuelling pipe was still attached, and as he drove off he pulled the rig apart, ripping the connecting head from the pipe. Luckily the team had stopped pumping fuel at that point – if they hadn't, the results don't bear thinking about, as there could have been 9 litres of fuel per second spewing over the pitlane. Button stopped and waited for someone to come and remove the connector before rejoining the race. The time lost here, coupled with a problem with a wheel nut in the first stop, sunk all chance of fighting at the front. But he still beat team-mate Rubens Barrichello.

Which left only Alonso and Michael Schumacher at the front, and despite severe tyre problems in the middle stint for Ferrari, and a faster car for Alonso, the result was never really in any doubt. Alonso may have been able to brake later, but the Ferrari seemed to have more top end power, and was able to pull out a gap down the straight, leaving Alonso with few chances to outbrake the Ferrari. It was shadow boxing, with the drivers feinting this way and that, but never in danger of actually landing a blow. In fact, Alonso was more in danger of suffering from self-inflicted injury, running a little too deep into several corners and running wide as a result.

Some other cars were competing, but as for what they did, who really knows – they were there only to be lapped if you believed the TV pictures. Apart from Christijan Albers, who barrel-rolled out on the first lap when an out of his depth Yuji Ide stuck his wheels up the inside in a slow corner when there was no gap. Albers' car rode over the Super Aguri's left front, and he rolled multiple times into the gravel. It brought out the safety car, but we then missed the restart due to an ITV advert break. Some days you just can't win.....

The philosophy of Plato

This weekend also saw round 2 of the Dunlop MSA British Touring Car Championship at Mondello Park in Ireland. A little bit of bumping and boring is to be expected, but a special mention has to go to Jason Plato, who seems to have an inbuilt inability to overtake without making some kind of contact. His usual technique is to gently bump the car in front in a braking zone, causing it to run wide, and then dive up the inside. It shouldn't be necessary – other drivers manage to overtake cleanly. A factory drive and a Channel 5 TV contract don't make you a great driver – your conduct on the track does that. Plato also seems unapologetic, and he would do well to learn from Paul Radisich, a New Zealand driver who now drives in the Australian V8 Supercar series. He used to be a factory Ford driver in the BTCC, and when he accidentally ran into Alain Menu in a Renault at Donington Park in the early 1990s, he slowed down to let Menu back past, so that he didn't gain what he considered to be an unfair advantage. He also won the World Touring Car Cup race twice. Who would you consider to be the better driver?

7th May 2006 - The Old Boy Still Has It

The Formula 1 field can be split into three, lets call them the A Grade racers, the B Grade, and the C's. Ferrari, Renault and McLaren are in class A, although Ferrari and Renault are really A+, with McLaren an A-. Next up are Toyota, BMW, Williams and Honda in the B Grade, the C graders being the rest. Within a given grade the drivers make the difference, and today they were the difference between winning and losing.

Given Michael Schumacher's "advancing years" (hell, he isn't even forty yet!), he has been increasingly pensioned off, especially given the performance of his Ferrari in the first couple of races. Ferrari have sorted out the car, and given a whiff of victory Michael pulled out a race from the top drawer. Alonso pitted for the second time, and Michael immediately reels off fastest lap after fastest lap before pitting himself and coming out of the pits ahead. It demonstrated Michael's mastery of contemporary F1, and put down a marker to Alonso that he was still a force to be reckoned with. At the same time, the race also highlighted the problems with contemporary F1 – there was never an overtake for the lead, and there was never likely to be one either. It was a high speed chess match played out over a long-term strategy, and although you can admire it, it will never beat the aggressive approach of charging down the middle to capture the board as a spectator event. The cerebral Max Mosley might like it, as he has stated in the past, but most of the spectators would like to see the winner pull off a pass or two which demonstrates that they are the best beyond doubt. Please ban refuelling.....

Also of interest was a much more mature approach from Felipe Massa, who never looked in danger of leaving the tarmac during the whole grand prix. At times he was faster than those ahead of him, and he kept Alonso honest over the dying laps. It was a timely reminder of what he can do, following his indiscretions at Melbourne. If he can keep this up for the rest of the year, then he will do his reputation no end of good, and will keep his place in F1. If it proves to be a flash in the pan, then it will simply prove to be an outlier in the statistical average of his "fast but wild" career, of note for showing what could have been. Even so, the likelihood is that if he wants to drive for Ferrari next year, then it will only be as a test driver. Rumour has it that Räikkönen has signed up, and if Schumacher doesn't retire, then there isn't a race seat available. Plus Ferrari may sign Moto GP rider Valentino Rossi. Four into two doesn't go, so Massa must continue to impress.

It would also seem that the ITV F1 television team have become the self-appointed Jenson Button interest group. Every single thing which happens is evaluated in the context of how it will affect "Jense", even if it isn't remotely likely to change anything. If someone crashes out, then it is deemed better for "Jense", and it is becoming a feature of the coverage which is coming to dominate all else. Yes, I would like to see him do well, but I would also like to see what the others are doing too, and how it affects them. I apologise on behalf of the English to all of those other nations who take the ITV TV coverage – it must be very annoying, especially in Australia and Canada when you have your own drivers to support.

And finally, I would like to thank the German TV director for his TV coverage. Following the pitiful coverage from Imola, it was noticeable how much better the coverage was. We got pit-to-car radio, and got to see the fight for 5th-9th when the front two were poolting around on their own. It made for a far better race, and following all the criticism I have heaped on the coverage before, it deserves some praise.

28th May 2006 - The dichotomy that is Schumacher

The Monaco Grand Prix highlighted in sharp relief the dichotomy that is Michael Schumacher. On the one hand, he pulled himself from the back of the grid at Monaco into the top 6 at the finish, using strategic brilliance and dashes of daring along the way. On the other, he was only in that position due to the crass gamesmanship in qualifying.

For someone of Michael Schumacher's ability, there is no need for gamesmanship of any kind, as he is good enough to overcome most things. Having set the pole position time, he went around for his final lap and "made a mistake" at Rascasse, the penultimate corner. He turned in a little late, went off line, and staying too close to the barrier to make the next corner properly, he went straight on, stopping before hitting the next barrier. He wasn't blocking the track, but the waved yellows and the dangerous position meant that all of the following drivers had to back off, and there wouldn't be any time for any of them to do another lap. Pole position was his, and the accident was highly advantageous. None of the rookie drivers managed to make the same mistake all weekend, and it is rare for anyone to actually come off at the point. For someone of Schumacher's ability to make such a "mistake" was therefore highly suspect.

The problem for Schumacher is that this isn't the first time that the spotlight has been shone on his racing ethics and left him found wanting. He is driving for Ferrari, and it tarnishes the marque's image as well. Ferrari have traditionally won through having superior cars and/or superior drivers, the likes of Phil Hill and Gilles Villeneuve battling hard and pulling through, burnishing the image in the process. Although the Schumacher era has brought much success to the marque, it has done it at the cost of controversy, whether it be through rule interpretations, team orders or suspect driving. Therefore when Schumacher does something like this, he not only damages himself, he damages the history and mystique of Ferrari. Winning should be honourable.

The stewards took their time over it, but eight hours later they decided that Schumacher's accident was in fact deliberate, and sent him to the back of the grid. It was a rare show of official displeasure, and rarely have they imposed such a penalty – that is usually done by the FIA retrospectively. So we had the rare sight of an all Ferrari back row, as Massa had stuffed his into the wall of Casino on the first lap of qualifying. It set the scene for Michael's fightback.

Despite the nature of Monaco and the difficulty in passing, the race was cooking nicely after the first few laps, with Alonso, Räikkönen and Webber pulling away from the rest of the field, setting fastest lap after fastest lap. It was promising even more after the first set of pit-stops. Räikkönen pitted first, but took on some 10 seconds worth of fuel, and on rejoining went just as fast as before. Webber was next, and took on slightly more. Alonso pitted next, but took on only around 8 seconds worth of fuel – any more and he would have come out behind the two others. Alonso's tyres were also less suited to his car, and he wasn't lapping as fast as before – the three were lapping nose to tail, with Montoya catching them all. There was great anticipation for the next set of stops – Alonso would have to pit first, Räikkönen and Webber were faster, and Webber potentially had the most fuel of all. Could we be facing a Williams race victory?

The Cosworth engine gremlins said no – Webber's engine appeared to let go approaching Ste Devote. He made it around the corner, and came to a halt at the end of the painted line marking the pit lane, flames issuing from the air intake. Webber hurled his steering wheel into his car as he got out, and the safety car was scrambled so that they could retrieve the car. Alonso and Räikkönen pitted together and emerged together, the McLaren's fuel advantage negated. However, the slower pace behind the safety car caused the McLaren's engine temperatures to rocket, and by the Loews hairpin his engine too went bang in a firey way. All opposition to the Alonso steamroller had been removed, as Montoya was six lapped cars behind in the queue. Come the restart Alonso disappeared off into the distance, with Montoya settling for a safe second. Third was briefly the subject of a fight for position until Trulli's Toyota also went bang. With Klien's gearbox being filled with neutrals, David Coulthard was now in third place, the highest placed finish yet for a Red Bull. The laps wound themselves down, and they finished in that order.

And so finished an eventful Monaco Grand Prix. Christian Horner, team principal for Red Bull, had promised to dive into the Red Bull Energy Center's swimming pool if one of his cars finished on the podium, possibly naked. He'll be praying the Red Bull gives him fins rather than wings.

11th June 2006 - The British Grand Prix

The British Grand Prix – how boring. It was moved forward because of the football World Cup, and quite frankly the World Cup showed up Grand Prix racing, as in the first five matches we have seen underdogs able to fight and beat the top dogs. Way to go Trinidad and Tobago! There wasn't the slightest likelihood of this happening in this race, and once the first lap argy-bargy had worked its way out of the collective system, with Scott Speed spooning Ralf Schumacher off the track, who in turn collected Mark Webber, it settled down to an exhibition of which car was technically superior and which driver was stronger than the other within a given team. Hence Renault was better than a Ferrari and Ferrari is better than a McLaren, and Alonso is better than Fisichella and Michael Schumacher is better than Felipe Massa. So the top five finishing positions were Alonso, M.Schumacher, Räikkönen, Fisichella, Massa. It's not like you couldn't have predicted this out the outset.

Once the first couple of laps were over, I took the opportunity to go through a book sent to me to review by Veloce Publishing. Called “Alpine Trials and Rallies 1910 to 1973” by Martin Pfundner, it covers the Alpine Trials which were in particular popularised in the 1950s, when Stirling Moss used to compete in them for Sunbeam, climbing the famous passes such as the Stelvio Pass. It proved to be a particularly interesting way of speeding the afternoon along, to the extent that I almost missed the finish of the race – it was that uneventful that even James Allen seemed subdued, and barely raised his voice as the race was ended. The one interesting point was how fast the track had become. In the 1980s, Keke Rosberg managed to lap the track at 168 mph in qualifying, and there was only about one braking point on the entire circuit – the other areas only merited lifts off the throttle. Extra corners were added, including the Luffield Complex, and still they can lap at 143 mph. The latest V8's have a lower top end speed, but better cornering, and despite a safety car period for a couple of laps, the race pace was only 25s slower than the previous year, and this was with Alonso backing off over the final few laps to protect his engine. I'd love to know how fast a modern F1 car could have lapped the 1980s version of the circuit.

And so the F1 circuits moves on to the Canadian Grand Prix at Montreal, another circuit with very long straights which is likely to provide a very similar result to that of the British Grand Prix. However, it was the site of a major Alonso foul up last year, when he misjudged a corner and sideswiped a wall. So he will feel that he has something to prove there, so might be even less inclined to take things easy, all the better to banish those demons and prove that he is becoming the complete driver. The prospect of watching a re-run of the British Grand Prix doesn't exactly fill me with huge amounts of joy – if there is another publisher out there who could send me a book to review for then, then I would be very grateful. In the meantime, there are plenty more world cup football matches to watch.....

There was one unintentional point of hilarity during the race, and that was the juxtaposition of the adverts and Jenson Button's engine going bang and dropping its oil having gained five positions in the first couple of laps. James Allen did his usual cutaway piece, we got the usual ITV graphics of some shaded tart waving a flag in amongst flames and a passing F1 car, shortly followed a male voice singing “Dream the impossible dream....” Yes, it was that Honda advert again. I bet that Jenson Button has an impossible dream every day – winning a race in his Honda. In fact, the impossible dream would simply be finishing a race at the moment, or qualifying ahead of Barrichello. Perhaps Button should take the Honda RA272 or the Honda NSX featured in the advert – they would be more reliable.

25th June 2006 - Marbles

In my last piece, I said that the Canadian Grand Prix would produce a very similar result to that of the British Grand Prix, and I was more accurate with this prediction than I intended, as the top five finishing positions were the same: Alonso, Schumacher, Räikkönen, Fisichella and Massa. I also suggested that it would be a re-run of the British Grand Prix – that prediction was a little less accurate.

A major feature of the race was the marbles, those little lumps of spent rubber which get thrown off the tyres to the side of the circuit. And when I say thrown off, I really mean thrown off – even at club meetings you can get hit by flying lumps of rubber thrown off of the tyres when standing at the side of the circuit, and the rubber in those are far harder than those in F1. This year the problem was far worse than before, exacerbated by the return to tyre changes. In 2005, tyres had to last an entire race, so were by necessity of harder construction, which meant that less rubber could be torn off them. This year tyres only have to last a third of a race or so, so can be far softer, and therefore they tear up more. There was so much debris as a result that a single line developed around the circuit – go off this, and your grip was much reduced. Oh, and the Montreal circuit doesn't really do run-off areas either, the circuit being lined by concrete barriers for most of the lap. It was an accident waiting to happen, especially given the amount of lappery the top five were doing.

The final ingredient to add to this mix was Ralf Schumacher and his Toyota. Something was amiss with the rear of his car, and a pit-stop to replace the tyres made it no better. At times he was lapping ten seconds off the pace, and the differential in speed in the corners between Alonso and Schumacher when he came up to lap him was frightening. The problem was that many of the corners were blind on entry, and if a car was coming up rapidly behind you then you could turn into a corner and not know it was there. The following car would have no option but to go off line to pass, and onto those marbles.....

Ralf continued on for many laps, and it was Jacques Villeneuve who was the poor unfortunate who was finally caught out. He came across the Toyota mid-corner going unusually slowly, and pulled out to overtake and avoid contact. Newton's laws of motion then took over, and he sailed straight on into the wall at speed, destroying the left front of his car. It was a sad end to an excellent drive which promised a decent haul of points.

However, there is another question raised here – what was Ralf still doing on track when his car was in such a state? Especially when he retired a lap later himself. In club racing, if your car has a mechanical defect, a black flag with an orange circle can be shown which means that you have to pit and have the defect seen to or face disqualification. Ralf should have been shown the same flag, as he was a danger to others and wasn't going to gain anything by staying out there, as there wasn't a high rate of attrition, and he wasn't going to score any points. The only thing achieved was putting others in danger, and BMW paid the price. With safety supposedly paramount for the FIA, with numerous technical changes made on safety grounds, then why was such a situation allowed to happen? If a car is obviously mechanically defective in some way, and is proving to be a hazard, then it has to be removed from the track. What would have happened had Alonso, Räikkönen or Michael Schumacher been involved instead? There would have been a much stronger reaction against the race stewards for allowing such a situation to occur, that's for sure.

As it was, Räikkönen still got caught out by the marbles, and it cost him second place. With a couple of laps to go, and with Michael Schumacher bearing rapidly down on him, Räikkönen braked slightly too late into the hairpin, and the marbles carried him wide. Schumacher flashed through as Räikkönen tip-toed around the outside. The race result was set.

Special mention has to go to Nico Rosberg, who managed a feisty few first corners. He overtook Michael Schumacher, and decided to battle it out with Montoya into the fast series of left-right corners. He tried to hang on around the outside, but the natural racing line pulled Montoya wide, and they tangled, Rosberg ending up in the wall. It was typical of the manoeuvres which are often seen in the lower racing formulae. Although Rosberg was ultimately at fault – if he had backed out of the overtake, the accident wouldn't have happened – it was great to see someone trying. Equally though, Montoya could have backed out too. The start of the race is the best chance most drivers will get all race for making up positions, and with a young driver anxious to make an impression, you have to expect that

all gaps would be gone for. Montoya is an experienced driver, and he would have known this. He had a choice too.

2nd July 2006 - The US GP – Points To Ponder

This race raised a few points to ponder. Consider for instance the performance of Ferrari. Something clicked this weekend, and they were the class of the field, comfortably annexing the front row in qualifying, and comfortably winning the race, so comfortably that they turned down the amount of revs they were using and were still faster than the rest of the field. Was it a one off, a freak event caused by the nature of the Indianapolis track, or was it down to the tyres? It didn't appear to be the tyres, as Williams, the other main Bridgestone team, didn't appear to noticeably benefit. Was it the track? Well, Ferrari weren't that far off in Montreal, and that is a similar track, in that it has high speed sections and a couple of fiddly bits. Perhaps the main reason was that Renault were strangely off the pace.

And it wasn't just Renault as a whole which was off the pace, it was Alonso in particular. Fisichella was on the pace, and not that far off the Ferrari's, but was compromised by being held up by Alonso at the start of the race (and those are words I didn't think that I would be writing this year). Once he had passed, he set a fastest lap (soon broken by Ferrari though), and attempted to chase them down. Not that he ever really had a chance, as Ferrari had too much in reserve. But still, it was Fisichella rather than Alonso who did the chasing. What went wrong?

According to the commentators, the problem was car set-up – Alonso simply couldn't get the car working as he liked it. Fisichella could though, and they can share car set-up data within the team. However, the driving styles of the two drivers are very different. Fisichella is a much more smooth driver, taking classical lines around the corners. Alonso likes a much more pointy front end, and is a touch more violent in his turn in. This mitigates against sharing with his team-mate. Even so, it was a very strange performance.

And one I can't recall from Michael Schumacher like that. There have been races recently, such as last year, when he seemed to be off the pace, but he was never quite so comprehensively beaten by his team-mate as Alonso appeared to be. Perhaps we have finally seen a chink in his armour – he can't drive around major problems with his car. If it is there or thereabouts you will get a championship level result, but if it is very off from perfect, then he can't sort it, and if it is too off from base, he can't drive around it either. Perhaps it was a one-off aberration, something not to be seen again. Even if it was, it will have been noted by the rest of the field, something which can perhaps be exploited to their advantage.

The race itself went off with a bang in the first two corners. Montoya braked too late into turn 2 as Räikkönen braked harder than usual, and he tagged the back of Räikkönen's car. Heidfeld squeezed Button slightly into the left hander (he tagged one of his tyres), but as Räikkönen spun around, Montoya hit Button, who then hit Heidfeld, who then barrel-rolled out – Montoya then collected Scott Speed as well. All were out bar Button, as was the safety car – three more had eliminated themselves at the first corner as well – they were Webber, Klien and Montagny. Button managed to continue, but was smoking heavily – he headed pitwards never to be seen trackwards again. He's still dreaming that impossible dream.....

Then we had a restart, and lost another one. This time Sato tried an optimistic overtaking manoeuvre on Monteiro into turn 1. The Super-Aguri ravaged the side of the Midland, ripping apart the floor. The Midland tried to continue for a couple of laps, but it was shedding too many pieces to be safe, and retired.

And so the race wound down. A one stopping Jarno Trulli, who started from the pit-lane, pulled a blinder of a race and finished fourth, beating his team-mate at the point that Ralf retired. This was one of those performances that you wish Trulli would put in more often, as it reminds you of what he is capable of. Mindful of this, Toyota have signed him up to a three year contract which has renewal options at the end of each year – all the more incentive for him to keep putting in those performances.

16th July 2006 - An ode to Magny-Cours

*How boring, boring, boring, booorrring,
I'd rather watch them race at Hungar-or-ing
The racing wasn't close,
The sport is grandiose,
Please wake me up if it gets to morning.*

*The only way to pass is to piiit-stop
The aero causes all the griip to drop
The corners split it up
I'm really quite fed up
As a race it's just a biiig flop.*

*Glory, glory is Itaaalia
Beaten yet again is Fraaancia
The Ferrari went ahead
Michelin went to bed
And Bridgestone is the one which is happier.*

*Montoya's disappeared off to NASCAR
Pedro is the one who got hiiis car
At Indy Monty crashed
He wasn't much abashed
And Ron had been pushed just too far.*

*To finish, back to Magny-Booooring,
Honda's engines weren't ripsnorting.
Rubinho's went up in smoke
And Button's had no poke
In the pits there wasn't much cavorting.*

As was hinted in the ode above, the race was decided by tyres. If you had Bridgestones you did well (except for Williams, who suffered delamination issues with the left rear), and if you were on Michelin's it was a case of damage limitation. Renault played this to perfection, Alonso pipping Massa for second by clever strategy, Alonso having got back onto form and outpacing his teammate Fisichella. Michael Schumacher won the race easily, and yet again nibbled at the championship gap. It is gradually coming down.....

Special mention must go to the Moto GP racers who were competing at the Sachsenring in Germany this weekend. Nicky Hayden finished in third for Honda with tyre marks up the arms and legs of his leathers from contact with team-mate Dani Pedrosa's front wheel. That is close racing, and neither came off or had their bikes damaged. F1 might like to take note.

30th July 2006 - Renault – An enigma wrapped up in a conundrum

Renault are an enigma wrapped up in a conundrum. They were the class act at the beginning of the year, but now things are not going to plan. They are losing skirmishes with the FIA, and are in danger of falling down the slippery slope to ultimate championship defeat, and as a result are looking for someone to blame. There was an open attempt to blame the tyres, but there's far more to it than that.

Renault have been using a mass-damper system on their cars this year, but for the German Grand Prix the FIA requested that it was removed, as it was a moveable system which affected the aerodynamics. That's a bit like saying that the suspension is a moveable aerodynamic device – the suspension goes up and down after all, and helps to keep the car level, but suspension isn't banned. It works by hanging a weight between two springs – as the car hits a bump, inertia delays the weight from moving up in sympathy, and the springs help to dampen the oscillations that do result. This inertia with the weight helps to keep the nose from moving around so much. However, there are interesting questions concerning what happens with these systems in the event of a crash. You now have a large sprung mass which can move around on impact – what happens if it moves violently sideways and collides with a bulkhead? This wouldn't be tested for properly in the FIA mandated impact tests, so is potentially more dangerous. There was still some arguments to be had over this, and Renault may get the system back for next weekend's Hungarian GP.

So how would they do in qualifying with the system missing? Fifth and seventh was the answer, but with Fisichella ahead of Alonso. Shades of Indianapolis perhaps. Kimi Räikkönen was on pole, followed by Michael Schumacher, Felipe Massa and Jenson Button. Yes, you read that right – a Honda was in the top four. They had a new spec engine for the weekend, but even given that, something clicked this weekend. It wasn't down just to luck.

From the start the Ferrari's disappeared from view, and Renault briefly decided to make a race of it, with both of them passing Button into the first corner. But they flattered to deceive – Button dispatched both of them within two laps. And then they proceeded to go backwards, Alonso with the faster backwards velocity.

Come the final pitstops, Renault appeared to try and make a statement, by parking the tyres from both Fisichella and Alonso in open view at the back of the team garage – they had had big lumps of rubber ripped from them, probably due to excessive blistering. If it was an attempt to blame Michelin, then there was an element of toys being thrown from the pram being shown. After all, they weren't the only team on Michelin's. Both McLaren and Honda were running Michelin's, and they were both in front of Renault. Renault get to choose the compound which suits their car better on the Friday, and have the same choices as everyone else. They simply got it wrong given the set-up of their car, and are feeling the pressure as the championship lead is whittled away.

What must be all the more perplexing was the performance of their drivers. Fisichella outqualified Alonso again, and outraced him in the first half of the race. In the second half Alonso got ahead, but that may have been down to closet team orders to ensure the maximum points haul for Alonso. Alonso then managed to run wide coming into the stadium section, running completely off the track – it could have been a ruinous mistake, but luck was with him and he regained the track, Fisichella acting as his tail gunner. Renault may have been off colour, but that doesn't really explain Alonso's performance. When he's on it, he can make Fisichella look distinctly ordinary, but this is the second recent race in which Fisichella had the upper hand, and Alonso also made quite a basic mistake. Is he feeling the pressure? One dodgy performance might be put down to bad luck, but two? It was not the performance of someone who is meant to be the heir to Schumacher.

And the others? Barrichello was doing reasonably well until his engine barfed its innards, but he was still a pit-stop worth of time behind Button when he bit the dust. Mark Webber was doing particularly well in his Williams, having gone for a one-stop strategy, and was up to fourth when his engine let go again. It was a promising performance for Williams given their recent efforts, but it was still ultimately blighted by mechanical failure. Cosworth are doing well given their resources, but doing well isn't enough in F1, and Williams have signed a three year deal with Toyota for engines from 2007. There

won't be many happy faces in the Toyota boardroom if Williams manage to consistently beat their own team with a smaller budget.

But what really helped to make a difference was the circuit. It may be an emasculated bastardisation of its former self, but it features a slow corner onto a long straight which goes into a wide hairpin, which means that cars can follow each other without aerodynamics being the limiting factor. If the FIA won't sort out the aerodynamic regulations to allow better racing, then could they at least please mandate that all circuits have to have some sort of similar configuration to allow overtaking to take place? There may not have been huge amounts of overtaking due to Bridgestone being better than Michelin, but at least you knew that it was possible, and thus the positions of the cars wasn't fixed forever. The race was all the better for that.

6th August 2006 - Da Matta critical on Button's weekend of success

Before I start my usual facetious ramblings about the state of Formula 1, we should spare a thought for ex-Toyota F1 driver and former Champ Car Champion Cristiano da Matta. During Champ Car World Series testing for his RuSPORT team at Elkhart Lake, he collided head-on with a deer. According to eye witness reports, the deer hit the head of da Matta, who then careered on into a barrier. He was taken immediately to hospital, where he had an operation to stem a burst blood vessel in his head. Let's hope that there are no additional complications.

The Formula 1 weekend made one thing clear – when there is a lack of grip, the racing is much better. The lack of grip came courtesy of rain on the Sunday, causing the drivers to have to drive to the limit of the conditions rather than to their cars ability. It made for an exciting race to watch, with the differing conditions favouring different cars at different times. Perhaps sprinkler systems should be a feature of all new tracks, and they can be randomly switched on during a race. Getting rid of front and rear wings would help with that too.

But I digress. The race was set up nicely by the goings on in Friday practice. Alonso got a 2s penalty which would be added to his qualifying time for brake-testing Doornbos, the Friday tester for Red Bull. Shortly after this the red flag was thrown, and as Alonso slowed heavily, causing the car behind to also slow dramatically, Michael Schumacher swept around the outside of both as he headed towards the pit. Now the red flag regulations say that there is to be no overtaking under the red flag, and all cars are to proceed back to the pits. The manoeuvre may well have been safe, but the rules are black and white on this, and 2s was to be added to the qualifying time of Michael as a penalty.

And during qualifying, having set the fourth fastest time, Button's engine blew big-time, dropping metal on the track, and setting his car alight. He was therefore going to suffer a 10 place grid penalty. This raises an interesting point: Button didn't commit any driving offence, but still suffers a harsher penalty than Schumacher and Alonso who were guilty of dangerous driving under the regulations. That doesn't really seem fair. Alonso's incident indicated that the recently increasing championship points pressure is getting to him. Alonso won last years championship fairly easily, without any pressure. This year he is being pressured far more, and he doesn't seem to bear up quite so well under it.

But come race day, the Gods seemed to smile on the main championship protagonists, as on a circuit on which it is notoriously difficult to pass, they dumped a quantity of water on the track and ensured that the race would at least start under wet conditions. How they must have been smiling down at Ferrari and Renault, as the tricky conditions meant that passing was now distinctly possible, and prayers had been answered. Michael Schumacher opted for a full wet tyre, as did Rubens Barrichello, while the rest of the field opted for intermediates. It was going to be interesting at the first couple of corners.

And so it proved, with the full wet tyre initially being best suited to the conditions, and the Renault launch system proving its worth yet again. By the end of the first couple of laps, Schumacher and Alonso were already in the top six, and it looked as though we may well have the usual type of race. But Räikkönen was still leading, and was pulling away, and the ever so slightly dryer conditions favoured Michelin over Bridgestone. Thus the Ferrari started to go back down the order almost as fast as it had gone up it, and Alonso started to have a look at the front two cars.

It was an interesting part of the race, as one of the fastest drivers was Pedro de la Rosa, who seemed to be far more at home in the conditions than Räikkönen. Indeed, even though de la Rosa pitted before Räikkönen, he was still able to make up all of the time lost to him on the track. It was a masterful display of control (even though he had spun on the warm-up trap – it's not only Montoya who can do this), and put down a marker to the team that he deserves the seat for next year. His performance put Kimi into the shade, and he really deserved his final second placed finish in the race. It was his highest ever finishing position. If he can recreate this kind of form in the next Grand Prix, then he will be a shoe-in for the second McLaren seat, and an outside bet for the championship.

Also making his way unobtrusively through the field was Jenson Button. He may not have been quite as rapid as Alonso and Schumacher, but he was still progressively moving forward, his smooth style suiting the conditions. Even so, you doubted that he would win. Surely the car would go bang again at some point? It was just a matter of when.

But no, he kept going, as did his teammate Barrichello. Barrichello had quickly realised that his initial tyre choice of full wets was too much of a gamble, and switched to intermediates fairly quickly, compromising his race. But the main protagonists then started to fall by the wayside, paving the way to his final placing of fourth.

First to go was Räikkönen. He was catching the Toro Rosso of Liuzzi very quickly, and the blue flags were being waved. Recognising this, Liuzzi didn't accelerate quite as hard as he could coming out of a corner, and stayed to the outside so that Räikkönen could pass. In an interview with ITV Räikkönen admitted that at that time he was looking in his mirror to allow the faster de la Rosa to pass. Distracted, he creamed into the right rear of Liuzzi and rode over the tyre, taking both of them out. De la Rosa steered through the detritus and carried on. The safety car was dispatched to allow the marshals to clear up.

Button had been catching Alonso at this point, but he now had a group of cars between himself and the Renault, and these cars wanted to race each other. When the safety car went in they didn't want to let Button past, and in the couple of laps it took him to get past Alonso had already pulled out six seconds. Was that afternoon over? No – he ground down the gap and got onto his tail. He then pitted for fuel, keeping his tyres on as they were fast enough, but he didn't take on enough to last the race. This was a gamble – there might have been more rain, in which case Alonso, who was fuelled to the end, wouldn't have to pit again. Button again set off after Alonso, setting fastest race laps as he went. The track dried out more and more, and it became obvious that they would have to change to dry tyres. The question was when.

Button was the first of the front two to do so, taking on the rest of the fuel as he pitted. He was now set to the end, and was still catching Alonso. Alonso pitted soon after, but as he accelerated out of the pits his car started to twitch. Going around turn 1 something was obviously amiss, and by turn two he was giving up – a driveshaft had snapped. The pressure was now off Button – all he had to do was protect his engine.

By this time Michael Schumacher's tyres were performing better, and he had been moving forwards again. But De la Rosa was going faster, and wanted to overtake. The Ferrari had the power down the straights to stay ahead, but was obviously slower in the corners. Going into the chicane, De la Rosa went up the inside and turned in, ahead. Schumacher then shot straight across the asphalted inside, and rejoined the circuit ahead, having kept his foot on the accelerator. Now the rules say that you are not allowed to gain an advantage when leaving the proscribed circuit, and Schumacher obviously had gained an advantage, as there would have been no way he would have been ahead had he gone through the chicane. There was also no attempt to let De la Rosa past on the following straight. It was cheating pure and simple, and you wondered if the stewards would let him get away with it. It was a sad thing to see from one so gifted.

De la Rosa didn't give up, and within two laps pulled the same move off properly, as he deserved to. Next up was Heidfeld, who wished to do the same to Schumacher. He tried next time around at the same place, but Schumacher simply turned in on him, and in the process terminally damaged his car, although he managed to make it back to the pits. It was a fitting result given his increasingly aggressive tactics through the race.

And so the race wound itself down to its conclusion, the Honda engine staying in one piece, and Button finally taking a deserving win on a day when he had been faster than the championship leaders. No longer will he be a driver who was never won a race, a driver who never quite produced and one who is termed a failure. It was somehow fitting that his teammate and Friday tester Anthony Davidson was in the commentary box replacing Martin Brundle, and you can imagine that Honda will be offering ITV a lot of money to keep him there on race days, as he may well be their lucky talisman. It lifts a lot of the recent pressure from the team, and is a just reward for the effort they have put in. It wasn't just a win, it was a win from fourteenth on the grid, and a win which was deserved, not gained through attrition. It

might be the win that starts the Honda ball rolling. They no longer have to dream the impossible dream – they have tasted it.

10th September 2006 - Arrivederci – Seal It With A Win

The Italian Grand Prix

There was only really one topic of interest at the Grand Prix this weekend – was Michael Schumacher going to retire? He wouldn't let it slip until after the race, which he won. And with Fernando Alonso dropping out due to an engine failure, things are looking nicely set up for Schumacher to sign off his career with yet another World Championship.

The only other drivers who were in with a look in for the race were Kimi Räikkönen, who was only ever a couple of seconds behind after the first set of pit-stops, and an inspired Robert Kubica. The BMW team were particularly on the pace this weekend, with Heidfeld making third on the grid, but even so, Kubica's race was particularly special. It was only his third event, and he managed to overtake his team-mate around the outside of turn 2, before leading the race for six laps when those in front of him pitted. This put his qualifying pace into perspective, as he had had more fuel on board than all of those in front of him, and he also showed exceptional maturity in withstanding the attentions of Felipe Massa until Massa shot his bolt by flat-spotting his tyres under braking into the first chicane. This was also the second race in succession that he finished ahead of his team-mate – perhaps Mario Thiessen (head of BMW Sauber) regrets his decision to sign Heidfeld for two years and being forced to drop Jacques Villeneuve. Villeneuve generally had the better of Heidfeld, and Kubica easily does so, but Heidfeld has the contract for 2007. Expect 2007 to be the final year in F1 for Heidfeld.

But for 2007 we won't have Michael Schumacher for the first time in 16 years, so there will be no clear benchmark for the others to compete against. He is the driver who has by far won the most championship races and world championships, but is he the best ever?

Let's consider the team-mates which Schumacher has had through the years:

1991 – Andrea de Cesaris (Jordan), Nelson Piquet (Benetton)
1992 – Martin Brundle (Benetton)
1993 – Riccardo Patrese (Benetton)
1994 – Jos Verstappen (Benetton)
1995 – Johnny Herbert (Benetton)
1996-1999 – Eddie Irvine (Ferrari)
2000-2005 – Rubens Barrichello (Ferrari)
2006 – Felipe Massa

None of those drivers were slouches, but none of them were of the top notch either. Piquet was seeing out his time in F1, possibly racing for a few years too many. Martin Brundle wasn't completely outraced, as he beat Michael on more than one occasion, but he too was no longer a fresh faced driver. The same could be said of Riccardo Patrese – another competent driver, but one who was coming to the end of his career. Jos Verstappen was an inexperienced novice driver who was easily dealt with, and Johnny Herbert was another in the Martin Brundle mould. As for Eddie Irvine, Rubens Barrichello and Felipe Massa, all were contractually obliged to play second fiddle to Michael's needs, ceding position when necessary, and only receiving Michael's cast-offs. Not once has he really faced a team-mate of comparable ability against which to judge him. That he is good is undoubtable, but he has never gone head to head like Prost and Senna, or Prost and Mansell. Consider the fact that when Michael Schumacher broke his leg and was replaced by Mika Salo, Salo had to give up his maiden win at Hockenheim to Eddie Irvine, who in turn easily outpaced Barrichello at Jordan. Barrichello had his days at Ferrari, yet has been outpaced for most of this season by Jenson Button. The racing world has lost out by not seeing him race against Räikkönen next year, the first time that he would have faced a team-mate of near equal ability. Does this highlight some kind of inner doubt about his ultimate ability? Probably not – it is more to do with a ruthless desire to have everything focussed on him.

However good he made be, and he is certainly one of the best there has ever been, his career will always be coloured by his standard of driving, and by the numerous "incidents" in which he has been involved. There are four in particular which highlight the dichotomy in his character:

- 1) Adelaide 1994, where he collided with Damon Hill.
- 2) Jerez 1997, where he drove into Jacques Villeneuve

- 3) Spa 2000, where he hit Mika Häkkinen's wing at 180 mph
- 4) Silverstone 2003, where he put Alonso onto the grass at 180 mph

The first two are the more famous incidents, both of which affected the outcome of the World Championship. In the first, Schumacher "closed the door" on Damon Hill despite knowing that he had a broken car, thus putting both out. In the second, Schumacher deliberately turned in on Villeneuve and drove into him to knock him off the circuit, this time failing. If he had got the benefit of the doubt in the first incident, the second one removed the doubt for most. It was one of the most singularly crass moves of all time.

The other two incidents are of lower profile, but have potentially had even more of an effect on the sport, as they have indirectly helped to rewrite the rule book. Whereas before you could place your car in the way, you weren't allowed to weave or block outright. Now though you have the infamous "one move" rule, where you are allowed to move once to block an opponent. Thus Schumacher could make one move at Silverstone in 2003, where he kept moving right so that Alonso had to go onto the grass to avoid contact at 180 mph, or where he moved over on the approach to Les Combes at Spa, hitting Häkkinen's wing. Such manoeuvres were deemed legal by the FIA, and so have to be allowed in the junior formulae as well, as there can't be one rule for F1 and one rule for the rest when it comes to driving standards. Thus behaviour on track got worse, a trend started by Ayrton Senna, but accelerated and taken to more of an extreme by Michael Schumacher.

Then there are the more frequent smaller transgressions, such as at Hungary where he cut a chicane and kept position, and all that happens is that the FIA issue a "clarification" saying that such behaviour was acceptable. But he is so good that he doesn't really need to do this at all – it simply demeans the ability that he has. Consider also the following: to achieve his seven world titles (and potentially eight), Schumacher has raced in F1 for 16 years, during which two people have lost their lives – Ayrton Senna and Roland Ratzenberger. When Juan Manuel Fangio won his five F1 titles, he raced for 9 years, in which time Alberto Ascari, Jean Behra, Raymond Sommer, Peter Collins and Luigi Musso, F1 drivers all, were all killed. In 1950, there were only 7 races (including the Indy 500, at which most European based drivers didn't compete) in the World Championship, whereas this year there are 18. Schumacher has won by far more races, yet he also has by far the most opportunity. Fangio only competed in 51 World Championship races, against 232 for Michael Schumacher up to the end of 2005. Fangio won 24 of his races, against 84 (again, up to the end of 2005) for Schumacher. Fangio also had drivers of the calibre of Stirling Moss as his team-mate.

So is Michael Schumacher the best ever? No, I don't think so. The best of his generation beyond doubt, but he has never faced the consistent challenge of more than one other top line driver at the same time. Prost won his titles against the likes of Piquet, Mansell, Senna and Lauda. Fangio competed against Farina, Ascari and Moss. Schumacher only really ever faced one contender in any given year. And the others didn't need to cheat either. There are lies, damned lies, and statistics. By most statistics (but not all – Fangio's win rate was 47%, compared to Schumacher's 36%) Schumacher is the best driver ever. Yet he is also the most contentious champion ever. History will judge him to be a flawed genius.

1st October 2006 – Variability (The Chinese GP)

The Chinese Grand Prix started with the track surface sopping with water, and we thus had a demonstration of the fact that if you want a decent Grand Prix, you need variability. As the track gradually dried out, different set-ups and different tyres worked at different levels, and the lack of grip meant that overtaking was possible. If a driver made a mistake and span, there was still a chance of getting back in contention. This was demonstrated amply by Jenson Button – despite losing oodles of time due to rooted rear tyres, and an off track excursion which let Pedro de la Rosa past, he was still able to get back in front of the Spaniard, overtake his team-mate, and then pull a peach of a pass on Nick Heidfeld whom he managed to box behind Takuma Sato by judicious placing of his car. There is a very strong case to be made for installing sprinkler systems at all F1 tracks, and then turning them on at random intervals during the race.

Or perhaps we should just turn the rule book back a couple of decades, ban refuelling, and force the cars to complete the race on a single tank of fuel. This would force variability back into the equation, as your race set-up would have to be radically different to your qualifying set-up, and your race set-up would have to work with a car carrying 200 litres of fuel, and while mostly empty. Thus the cars would work at different levels of performance at different times. A car might get ahead at the beginning, but then fall back as the tyres suffer and as the handling changes when the fuel burns off. Rather like a wet weather race in fact. And cars would be forced to overtake rather than waiting for a fuel stop. Fuel stops allow the cars to be much more even during a race, with much less difference between a full fuel tank and an empty one, thus allowing the cars to race with a more optimal set-up. Thus the faster cars typically remain faster. If their set-up has to be compromised to cope with variability, a faster car might not always be faster. And the better drivers will cope better with the variability than the average ones, so they will be able to make up for car deficiencies better.

So what prevents this from happening? Perhaps the main reason is that the FIA (and in particular Max Moseley) would have to admit that they were wrong. Moseley has stated in the past that refuelling allows changes of position, and that the resulting strategies make races into a chess match and that spectators like this. In reality, refuelling was the answer to another question – how to allow cars to pass each other when the aerodynamics of them makes it too difficult, but rather perversely it has reduced on track overtaking, as drivers would rather not take the risk when they can do it safely in the pits. Oh, and in the recent FIA survey, more than 70% of respondents said that they would like to see more overtaking. But Max Moseley is never wrong, and if there is any movement on this, no doubt there will be a very reasoned argument as to why it is a logical extension of what went before. We can but hope.

The end result of all of this variability, and a cross-threaded wheelnut for Alonso, was another win for Michael Schumacher, with Alonso second, and Fisichella third, and from a championship perspective we couldn't have asked for anything better. Michael Schumacher and Fernando Alonso are tied for points, with Schumacher classified in first due to a higher number of race wins. In the manufacturers championship, Renault are two points ahead of Ferrari. Thus the whole championship is distilled down to the final two races of the year at Suzuka and Interlagos. If Michael Schumacher wins the next race with Alonso not scoring, he has won the championship due to his higher win rate, whatever Alonso does in the final race. If Alonso wins both, he wins the championship. And there are hundreds of variants in between. In the manufacturers championship, Renault are arguably in the better position due to the better strength of their driver pairing. Felipe Massa has proved to be a far improved driver this year than I ever believed he would be, but even so he still retains the ability to screw up from time to time, as evidenced in China with more than one spin and a collision with David Coulthard. Giancarlo Fisichella on the other hand tends to be more reliable.

So, lets make a prediction – it can't be any worse than any of the others I made earlier in the year. Michael Schumacher will win the World Championship for drivers, and Renault will win the World Championship for manufacturers. All will be revealed in the next three weeks.

8th October 2006 - Exciting but anticlimactic (The Japanese GP)

Ferrari are in the last chance saloon, where the fat lady is practicing her scales. Fate is sat in the corner, nursing a drink, smiling at having dealt an even hand to both of the championship leaders. Alonso suffered an engine blow-up at Monza, Ferrari's home race, and Ferrari suffered an engine blow-up in Japan, Renault's holiday home (the Renault company owns a large chunk of Japan's Nissan, with Nissan having a stake in Renault as well). Everyone knows what is likely to happen next in Brazil, but there is always that one chance. And it has already happened in the IRL this year – Sam Hornish finished level on points with 2005 series champion Dan Wheldon, but won due to the number of wins, having won four races to Wheldon's two. Could we get the same thing happening twice? If we took a closer look at Fate, we might notice a faint smile, that slight curl at the ends of the mouth which hints at another joke about to be thrown. Or we might not. That's the thing with Fate – you never know what she intends.

The problem was that we had a proper race in Shanghai which set up a thrilling end to the season. Therefore the anticipation for this race was huge. Ferrari annexing the front row, with Alonso in sixth, made it an even better prospect. Toyota had the second row to themselves, but this was obviously their usual Japan showing-off – each year they run lower fuel than everyone else to make sure they are photographed near or at the front at their home race, and then fall backwards as the race progresses. Unusually this year, they didn't fall back anywhere near as rapidly or much as usual, but you have to ask why they bother. The sport is televised world-wide all year, and everyone knows what they are capable of and how they normally perform. No-one is naïve enough to believe that qualifying third and fourth is an appropriate representation of their competitive level, so all it does is highlight the superficiality of the company, and when coupled with the legal problems they are facing in Germany from allegedly using Ferrari design data in years past, it doesn't paint a very flattering picture. They have one of the largest corporate budgets of all teams, yet the tiny minnows called Cosworth can produce a far better engine, and Renault (who have a smaller budget and are a smaller company than Toyota) can build a better chassis. They need to step up to the top level quickly, or Toyota might simply pull the plug on the whole operation. Especially if they get regularly beaten next year by Williams who will be using a customer Toyota engine.

The race itself was a normal F1 race, without much overtaking, and if we are really honest, not much entertainment either. At the front Michael Schumacher was going around as fast as he could, and Alonso, once clear of the Toyota's and Massa (who had to pit early having picked up a puncture), was circulating at a similar pace. He could start catching Schumacher, but you had the feeling that he wasn't going to be able to overtake, as he simply didn't have enough of a performance advantage. The two were in a race of their own, and no-one else got a look in. Apart from the lower order positions, no-one was really racing each other either. Red Bull, Toro Rosso and Spyker Midland were nose to tail, tripping each other up, and the Spyker actually ahead of some cars rather than at the back. It was an impressive showing, one which was unfortunately spoilt when Albers took the idea of braking (or should that be breaking?) for a corner to a whole new level. Exiting the "fearsome" (more on that later) 130R corner at 180 mph, he hit the brakes and immediately broke a driveshaft. This snapped the attachment of the right rear wheel to the car, and the back of the car exploded, the rear wing shooting skywards, the right rear bouncing away, the errant driveshaft bouncing down the track, and sundry pieces of carbon fibre scattering themselves right, left and centre. Luckily the car stayed on track and he could drive his wreckage back to the pits, but it was definitely a messy pants moment.

So, back to 130R. The commentators (well, perhaps I exaggerate – James Allen does at least) rave about this corner, but from following the in-car footage you have to ask why. Since it has been reprofiled and moved back, there are acres of asphalt run-off, and it isn't quite as long. The cars have got more efficient over the years, and all of them were easily making it around the corner. You arrive, turn left, and can take more than one line if you are trying to set up an overtake. No longer is it like threading the eye of a needle, trying desperately to hang on while forcing yourself not to back off. When Allan McNish tore a hole in the armco at the exit of the corner, it was a truly fearsome corner which could bite. With the changes and the latest generation of cars, it is a pussy cat of a corner, in that its genes are passed down from wild brethren, and if you are particularly unlucky it can bite you or even strike fatally, but by and large it will sit there softly and enjoy its tummy being rubbed. Let's get

rid of some of the downforce so that we can reverse the declawing of the corners and give them back some sharpness.

And so we go to Brazil for the final race of the season. If Alonso finishes in the top eight, he wins the championship whatever happens to anyone else. Michael Schumacher needs to win without Alonso scoring. Unlikely. But then it happened when the fat lady sang at the rehearsals that were the IRL. What chance at the Brazilian finale?

22nd October 2006 - The race that was a metaphor for a season

The Brazilian Grand Prix, the last race of the season, was a metaphor for the entire season. Felipe Massa showed much improved form to win the race. Fernando Alonso drove a steady race to garner as many points as he could when his car wasn't fast enough. And Michael Schumacher demonstrated just how good he is, fighting back from the results of an early puncture which placed him in 17th to a well deserved fourth, having pulled a peach of a move on Räikkönen.

But the moment of the race occurred before the race itself got underway. A ceremony took place at the front of the grid to celebrate the career of Michael Schumacher, with a trophy being awarded to Michael by Pelé. Most of the drivers attended. Most, but not all. Martin Brundle caught up with Kimi Räikkönen on the grid, and asked him why he hadn't attended.

"I was having a shit," he replied.

It was a moment of comic genius at so many levels, and Räikkönen's smirk as he said it heightened the amusement. The incongruity of such a comment was funny in itself, but so was the irreverence, and highlighted exactly why Räikkönen has been signed by Ferrari for next year – he is not overawed by the reputation of anyone, and doesn't see why he should show obsequiousness either. It's probably also why Michael Schumacher decided to take retirement. It was the first time that Michael would have faced a team-mate who was potentially as fast, and Räikkönen certainly wouldn't want to be a subservient number two. As it was, it left Martin Brundle a little non-plussed. How do you follow up that when it has been broadcast live on national TV?

You follow it up with one of your best drives ever if you are Michael Schumacher. Starting from tenth on the grid, he was in to the top six when Rosberg binned his car into the wall at the start of the main straight, bringing out the safety car. Shards of carbon fibre were scattered across the track, and it was probably one of these which caused Schumacher's tyre to suddenly pop in the Senna S. It was another two miles before he could get back to the pits, and he lost some 70 seconds to the leader, Felipe Massa. Come the end it was less than 30, with only Button, Alonso and Massa ahead of him. He fought all the way, and reminded all of us what we are losing. It was a pure race, one without a questionable move, that overly robust chop or "one move" which has sullied other performances of his. If only he could have done that more often.

For Alonso, it was a race in which he didn't come under as much pressure as he could have done, but even so didn't make a mistake worthy of a mention, which has largely been the case all year. He now becomes the youngest ever double world champion, and takes the number 1 with him to McLaren. If they can sort out their reliability, he can continue onwards and perhaps threaten Michael's records. But given recent history, that is a big if.

Third in the race was Jenson Button, and what I hadn't realised until James Allen pointed it out is that Jenson has scored more points in the tail end of this year than any other driver. He has put in a consistent performance, and given that he started in fourteenth, way behind Barrichello, and that he finished three places ahead of him in the race, it shows the potential he has. Barrichello is no slouch, as he demonstrated against Michael Schumacher, so to outperform him is such a way goes to put Button's talent in perspective. He might not be quite outright as fast as Räikkönen and Alonso, but he isn't that far off. If Honda can give him a reliable and fast car next year, then we could be in for peach of a season. Ferrari will want to prove that there is life after Michael, Alonso will want to prove that he can win for someone else other than Renault, and Button will want to prove that he can win more than once in his career. Roll on 2007!