

[Transcript] Sky Sports F1 Podcast / Why Lewis was disqualified in Austin | Alpine's superstar consortium | Could Mercedes have won US GP?

Hello, everyone, and welcome to this week's episode of the Sky Sports F1 podcast, coming to you from the lobby of our hotel here in Austin. For this one, I'm joined by an array of guests that I've managed to drag here at 9am on a Monday morning after a Formula 1 race in Austin. Thank you, everyone, for coming. We've got Rachel Brooks, we've got Jack Dewin, F2 driver and Alpine Reserve driver. We've also got Blake Hinsey, who's an F1 creator, former performance engineer to Max Verstappen. I think that's everyone. Oh, and Texan as well. How are you? Yeah, there we go. So very good. Let's start by how everyone's weeks were. Jack, go on. How was your weekend? It was cool. Austin, it's my second time here. First time was last year and a place that I really looked forward to coming to.

Last year, I think, because it was new and maybe I wasn't doing as many marketing and media activities. The weekend felt like super long and I was like, holy crap, this is super cool. Where this weekend, quite a few opportunities that I had available to go do thanks to the team and also potentially just because I was more involved, it went by in the click of the finger. So, yeah, special that it's done and that's it again, but it's also closer to my FB1 coming. So I was happy about that. We are going to get on to that because that's very exciting. You're going to be in the car in Mexico. Blake, how was your weekend? I did not get as much barbecue as I would have liked for being back home, but it went by really quickly. I was doing a little bit of hosting with Red Bull in their turn 17, and that was really fun. A little bit outside of my wheelhouse, technical content or hosting, but it was different. And the same thing, being so busy the week just went by super fast, but this is one of the highlights of the calendar. If I could pick a race to go to every year, this would be one of them. Not just because you're Texan? It is. I'm a little bit biased. But I think if you ask anybody in the paddock, they will say that Austin is a really great event in the cities close to the track. The track's great. Thrilling races usually, and yeah. And Jack, you're only staying three minutes around the corner. Yeah, exactly. So I'm a big fan of how convenient this is. No, being downtown, it's super cool. It's like you're in the heart of the city as well. So it's great that we can all be here and not sort of stretched out and staying like at some places through the year, but staying like 40 minutes away, even from the city and then from the circuit. Traffic is a bit mid, I'd say, depending on how you come in. So that can be the stretch, but that's just because they're Rayo fans, obviously. So it's an atmosphere here that I haven't seen really much from anywhere else.

I just wish it wasn't the first one of a triple header. I know. I know. I think this calendar is so long this year to make this the first one of a triple header. Everyone wants to enjoy themselves because it's a great city. And now you've got two more, two weekends in a row to go to next. It's quite tough. I think there are going to be some very, very tired faces come Brazil.

There really will be. And busy weekend for us as well. And Sky was next. We had F1 Academy. Oh yeah, we were working.

On top of that.

Yeah, no, we did. We had F1 Academy, which was brilliant to see that and to see it put it on the channel and hopefully we'll see a lot more of it next year.

Yeah, absolutely. Right. Loads to get through on the podcast. I guess the only place to

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start really is the news that Lewis Hamilton and Charles Leclerc were disqualified from the race.

And let's try and give a brief kind of overview of what happened. So the race finishes, Lewis finishes second, just a couple of seconds behind the eventual race winner Max Verstappen. They, Hamilton and Leclerc then get referred to the stewards for excessive wear on the underfloor skid blocks in the car's plank. I'm going to pause there. Blake, over to you here. What is a, what is it? Just, just explain to everyone at home. What is a, what is a plank? Why were they reprimanded?

Okay. So in short, the bottom of the car is a, it's a plastic with wood fire plank that's there for slowing the car down if you lose wheels and it sits onto the ground in that plank at various parts, one at the front, I think two in the sides and one at the rear. There's a titanium skid block, which makes those magnificent bright sparks, especially in the night races. Those are the legality skids. They are 10 millimeters thick. And after the race, they are measured, they can be measured after qualifying and everything else. But if they are more than one millimeter, so if they're nine millimeter thick, less than that, you will be referred to the stewards for a breach. And it's one of those skid wears, one of those really cut and dry things to eliminate people taking advantage of regulation. So setting the ride heights of the car, that determines how low you can do it by how much it wears out.

That's where it comes in because the lower the car, the better effect you get. So that's what they're trying to eliminate. They're trying to stop anyone putting it too low. And then you have the skid blocks. And unfortunately, if it's worn too much, it suggests the car was too low. In which case you've got a performance advantage, you're out of the race.

Easy. Yeah. It's one of the things like the front of the car is really good for adding front load. And the rear of the car depends a lot more on the philosophy or the window of that car. And obviously we saw some teams this weekend trying to get that low as the rear as low as possible. And a low rear ride height is also good for reducing drag. So Ferrari was pretty slick in a straight line this weekend. Was it down to that? I don't think it's that big. Like five millimeters of rear ride height is a first order performance advantage in terms of drag. And if that was where their car needed to be for aerodynamically, yeah, it could have been a reasonable advantage. How much? Impossible to say.

We should also clear up that it's up to the FIA and Joe Bauer technical delegate, how many cars they check. They checked one after the Qatar Sprint. They checked some more after Japan, but they picked up four, we believe, yesterday. And two, they got hit with two of them. So they looked at Max Lando, Lewis and Charles. Lewis and Charles were both fell foul of it, which begs the question, why not then check all of them surely?

Jack, sorry, I just wanted to get your view on this. It may mainly in the sense of as a driver, when something like this happens, when your car is found to be in breach of the rules, there's nothing really you can do about that as a driver, particularly when Lewis, you know, that was an incredible race from Lewis. I mean, goodness knows what would have happened to Feet of One, if Mercedes had got their first win of the season. So as a driver, Jack, what's your reaction when you hear something like this happening?

You know, it'd be super difficult to take. Like anyway, I think it would have been a lot worse

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if they had had a great season. They were in a championship contending position and these points were extremely crucial. For sure, they are. However, I think Lewis will still be able to take away that they were fast. They were back into a position where they actually, you know, a couple more laps, the win was potentially on. So nothing can take that away potentially if there was any performance enhancement. Maybe there were, maybe there wasn't. I know that the Mercedes

Carp particularly wasn't super fast in a straight line this weekend. So potentially, I don't know the exact in and out on where they were illegal, where they did breach, but potentially that could be, you know, it's an all round performance game, you know, through the corners, obviously less drag as well. The Ferrari who they thought they might have been racing was probably the quickest car as well. So I don't really know how that one's gone so wrong. But yeah, you know, from a driver's perspective, it's super tough because it's completely outside of your control. And there's really not much you can do to protest or argue on a technical breach like that.

Rach, what was the, what was the mood in the pen yesterday? Because obviously you would have spoken

to the drivers before all this news had broken. Lewis must have been very positive in the pen, I'm going to say. He was, he was positive. He was, I mean, they're still not winning races. And he, you know, whether or not they're going to be in a position to win before the end of the year, who knows? I mean, Max certainly said Mercedes could have won yesterday with the right strategy, but I don't know how much of that is. I think they could have. I did look through it, and it was a matter of, you know, that first stop staying at a little bit longer, being a little bit indecisive.

It was something like six seconds lost, and then another second and a bit and the pit stop suboptimal. So I think Lewis would have been ahead of Max. And then the only question is, how would that fight have gone down being on the back foot? Because the leader, people defending tend to lose quite a bit of time and burn up tires quite quickly. And the attacker, on the last this set of tires, they seem to be able to go for quite a few laps. So I genuinely think on pace and merit and performance. But why is it very likely? Why did they think they could do a one stop? Do you think because it was a sprint race, because they hadn't run those tires long enough, they didn't have the data they couldn't have possibly known? Look, that was possible. Yeah.

And it's weird because looking at the lap times, if he had been able to hold those lap times after the cars in front had pit, if he had, you know, they said, we're not going to cover, we're going to wait a couple laps. And then the performance loss for the next three laps was abysmal, and they just stayed out. And I don't know if it was a indecisiveness or a different plan. And it was it's really hard for me to extrapolate from that. But you know, you see it in hindsight, and it's that was not the correct answer at all. But it's easy. It was difficult to call, but also to target them the one stop, it wasn't really even long enough. You know, it wasn't sort of at that pace level, that management that sort of see that it was a clear option.

So it was either a sort of middle game where they hadn't really committed, like you said, indecisiveness hasn't committed to one sort of option and ended up in no man's land to the point where Max all of a sudden was way in the end past their pit window, and they'd lost out all this time. And Lewis as well would be questioning, you know, where's our race at now? So everything sort

of was up in the air, they were having to rescue it from there. So from, in my opinion, being in

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structure, strong position to sort of being thrown out. The fact that it came so close in the end proves that definitely the wind was on with, like you said, the right strategy calls.

I mean, if Lewis had gone in a couple of laps earlier for that first stop, would that have changed the whole thing? Yeah, if they had covered that would have been fine. It's just they were something like a couple seconds ahead before that sequence and then came out a couple seconds behind. So losing six seconds of the tires dropping off a second and a bit slow on the pit stop. Yeah. And it was like one of those things, you're going like, right, maybe the one stop is on, we'll just monitor, oh, maybe that lap was just a little bit of a mistake. It's okay. The next lap is substantially slower than that one. You're like, what do we do? We've missed our chance.

Yeah. And then you leave it one more lap and you've, it's not made that much difference at that point. You would have come out behind that group of cars. And to answer your question, Matt, Charl as well in the pen afterwards, really flat strategy all wrong again. I mean, he was first to sixth and pole to sixth and the person in sixth would won the race. I mean, poor Charl. That's a really bold call considering you have free practice one straight into park for me. No more setup changes. Nobody's done any proper data gathering and free practice one. You have a sprint, which doesn't go very well, you know, the degradation on the far did not look spectacular. So then it's like, let's try one stop on Sunday sitting, sitting here. It's hard to see, but I'm sure if you had some of those conversations in, you know, their treehouse or their meeting room, you might have been thinking, maybe this is our only play to have a shot at it considering our sprint race performance wasn't ideal. We need to do something different and maybe some thoughts and prayers kind of thing. But it's really tough to say without being a fly on the wall in there. We would all like to be a fly on the wall in that. Can you guys do that? Yeah, we'll put a little GoPro in the corner. Jack, when you're in the car, mid race, and you realize you're in this no man's land, the sort of no man's land that you mentioned, what's that feeling like? How dispiriting is that? And obviously Lewis is a very experienced

Formula One driver. He's bracing hundreds and hundreds of races. So he will know and he will be aware, won't he, of just exactly what's going on with the strategy? Yeah, I think at that point to, you know, you're relying obviously a lot on the team, but also you potentially be relying on a safety car, something you know that, all right, my race is potentially not over, but it's potentially going to go quite bad here. Either we have to sit down and sit through this, you know, accept it, or we could keep going and hope for a late safety car. And all of a sudden, this could turn back into in the blossoms and fairies and we could win the race. Which you hope for, you hope for, you hope for, and all of a sudden you realize that it's coming up to the last lap. It's too late. But yeah, at that point from a driver's perspective, you can only be honest with how you're feeling, how the car is, what level you're pushing, how much you're managing, and relaying that back to the team. In the end, they've got obviously all eyes or information on everything that everyone else is doing, plus who potentially has been going to that extent on that same tyre, how they've managed to drop off or continue. So their perspective, they're in the seat to really make the call at that point, because you've gone past your expected pit window where you thought you were pushing to. So now it's, you have to adapt to them. So it's a difficult situation to be in as a driver for sure.

Rachel, this actually, though, is evidence that Mercedes have come a lot further forward maybe

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than we expected. Toto referenced Japan and how they didn't perform well in Japan. He said, this was a similar track in the sense of fast-flowing circuit. And they realistically could have won the race apart from the disqualification. They could have won the race yesterday. Yeah, definitely. And I mean, interestingly, talking to Lewis afterwards, he was saying that they're still developing all the time. They obviously have all eyes on 2024. I mean, this is not a 2023 car we're looking at. This is what they are working on for 2024, everything they're bringing and looking at. But he said, oh, Red Bull have stopped developing, you know, because they don't need to, they've got this amazing car. But if Mercedes are closing that gap now, I mean, everything they've been doing this year has been geared towards turning that car around from what it started out as, even started out as last year, let's be honest, that it's definitely good science for next year, hopefully. I mean, please, let's not have a massive gap to the front again next year. But I have to hope these are positive signs from Mercedes. The Ferrari challenge is just, I don't know where, it's one minute you think they're there and then they're not, and then they are, and then they're not again. And you don't really have the confidence that they know the direction they're going in, do you with Ferrari right now. But with Mercedes, it finally feels like they have a path, they have a trajectory, they know what they're doing now and all of it, just tiny increments, isn't it, towards closing that gap a bit more. The differences with Mercedes, if they're often qualifying, often the race, they're consistent, the package is out the window, the package is out the window. Whereas Ferrari, they can put it on pole like they did on Friday. And even when I was doing the post race show with F1, my prediction was that Charles wasn't going to be in the top three on Sunday, which was a contradiction to the others and also not a nice thing to hear as a Ferrari fan either. But it was from the fact that they didn't really expect to be P1 in qualifying, they don't know why they were P1 in qualifying. That's the worry, isn't it? When you don't know how, why, yes, in the moment, it's a great thing where P1, hooray, it's also a scary thing going, we don't know why this has happened, so it could equally go the other way so quickly at a click of a finger. So that's always a scary position to be in. It's great if it continues to go well, but unless you have that recipe, that formula, you can't evolve it. So it's always going to be fluctuation and especially in a race situation, they just don't seem to be able to, number one, get it all together in all terms, and it's unfortunate obviously for the drivers, but on top of that, they are in these meeting rooms, they are in these discussions. The strategy doesn't happen just once they're in the car, so I think it is a team effort like always, but yeah, they're in a tricky position, like you guys said. That's a really interesting thing as well because you're looking from the outside, you think it's the pinnacle of motorsport technology, you have all the answers, but the reality is the thing that makes Formula One such a beautiful sport is the uncertainty that the teams have, aerodynamic windows, the packages, the tire behavior, you have a weekend like a sprint weekend where you have much less data gathering than you have these things that it's like, then we're getting these races that are unpredictable. Yes, the performance pecking order with Red Bull being so dominant makes that somewhat predictable, but nothing is a certainty going into these races. They do not have everything figured out, and I think that's good end to one extent. That might be a benefit of these sprint weekends, as you do get a little bit of chaos. Was that responsible for Mercedes' strong performance

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this weekend? I don't think so. If you look at their performance trends throughout the season, they are more often improving than not, and then like we discussed, sometimes the Ferrari is just randomly out of the window, but yeah.

I want to ask you, with Max's break issues, how much of an issue was that, do we think, time-wise? Do we think that helped Mercedes close the gap? Because he was going down and down and

down, wasn't it? Yeah, his lap times, Lewis was closing in. I mean, Lewis was like eight seconds behind at one point and got it down to less than two. I think part of that, the pace from the Mercedes was genuine, and I think towards the end, you had the compound difference as well, which was a strategy thing, which you make your bed when you pick the tires, you use maximum, medium, medium, but at the same time, those kind of things, and you can probably speak more to this than I can, but from a technical point of view, it was very likely the brakes were either out of the window temperature-wise, or there was an issue with the material, because I think he did change the brakes Saturday night.

He told me on Sunday that they changed them overnight on Saturday, and he didn't like the set he had on Sunday. Yeah, so sometimes the bite and performance of a set, and we've seen that loads of time in the past, like you have a set, and for whatever reason, carbon-carbon material is another one of those things like tires. There's a bit of chaos in that as well, that could have been it. Was it a substantial performance differentiator? I don't know, but you could tell from his radio feedback that he was head down, yeah, teeth clenched, leave me alone, let me get on with it. He wasn't happy, and potentially with the carbon brakes, they would at the factory run those in, so to make sure on the race weekend, they don't have time to bed in a set of brakes. They can't lose that time, so most of these are bedded in the factory and then placed in the car, and until obviously he gets that feeling as he is on Sunday, you don't really know where they are, you expect, you hope them to be perfect, but sometimes you can slightly graze the carbon disc, and what that means is that it hasn't been completely pressed, it hasn't been sort of bedded in correctly, so then all of a sudden his feeling when he's punching the pedal is that the car isn't decelerating as he would like to. So potentially that can also then put him into a situation where he's playing around with the brake bias, potentially going two forwards, two to the rear, which then is offsetting the temperatures, you get yourself into further and further problems, and all of a sudden you have more problems than you started with, but that's all just from trying to correct and trying to slow the car down, especially the place like Kota where you have so many heavy brakings where you need that deceleration to help with the car balance as well, so not only with that, he was then having issues with the GP talking through his brake. That's what I wanted to ask you, so you said don't talk to me through the corners, that's because he's doing all those things you were just saying. Potentially it was mainly through the braking, which I thought it was quite crazy how he managed to keep timing that, I don't know how that was happening, but potentially it was somewhere where he was so locked in having to be so focused to try and get this thing sorted. I don't know what he potentially was doing through the braking, I think maybe it was maximum focus just to try and get this car stopped, because he won't be wanting to brake extremely early, because he knows that he has Lewis and Mercedes that are charging, that are quick, so he's going to be trying to manage that as much as possible, and I don't know what tools they have accessible and available to do

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that, but he for sure I know wasn't Sunday cruising just going in there on the brakes. I don't feel like we've seen that level of reaction in terms of head down the season in the dialogue between GP and Max, so that tells me CPU is very high usage, I'm going as fast as I absolutely can, and I'm having trouble picking my braking point, because the performance of the brakes is quite variable. Braking into turn one, you saw him qualifying on Friday, he had the little lock up there, that lost a load of time, defending, making sure 11, 12, those are big stops, and if you get those wrong, that could be a couple tenths of a second, and you're overtaken, done. It was interesting to see that, so I think the challenge for Mercedes was real.

Blake, you've worked with Jampiro Lambiasi, Max's race engineer. What do you make of the, I know they have this sort of strange relation, I don't even know how we define their relationship. Old married couple.

Yeah, let's say old married couple. You've worked with him, and we've worked with both of them, so how do you kind of see that relationship?

And I had this conversation, so I had the chance to talk to Max on Saturday for a little bit of like an interview hosting thing, and Max said it perfectly, he's like, me and GP and the rest of the team are always pushing for 100%. Sometimes you have to accept when you're trying to get 100% out of everything, you don't have time to filter out temper and attitude, just like,

listen, let's just get this done. And that's the thing, and there's a level of respect between them that allows that, and it doesn't blur any lines. It's like, we both want to do the maximum performance possible, so we'll accept that sometimes when my CPU usage is 100%, I could be short with you in the same way, you see GP giving back that tough love to say, trust us, we're on the pit wall, we have all the eyes on it, this is what we should do.

We've heard that before with Lewis and Bono, it's not unusual. When you have that good dynamic with your race engineer, then there's no need for please and thank you, we're getting a job done here, let's just get on with it, and then afterwards you talk about whatever you need to talk about. Absolutely. I can totally imagine in the car at the time, you're both just trying to get the job done, aren't you?

Can you relate, Jack? I bet you use please and thank you, don't you?

After I win, thank you very much for that.

Can we have some tires, please? These are really not nice.

I'm emotional, I had to work quite a lot on my emotions as well, so I've definitely, I'd say improved as well over my junior career of maintaining that level of exertion and really trying to basically calm down, because I'm keen, I'm really ready to drive, so I don't really need to be pumped up in a way, so for sure I'm on a high level and potentially can be on that same level as Max over the radio, but I also think as a driver you need to be calm, you see that as well on the level of work, they do mentally to try and be assertive, short, but I don't think we dive in to see how, when you see Bono speak back to Lewis or GP, how calm, short, after being screamed over the radio they are, it's always GP understood, okay, very short, because they have to be, when you're trying to tame a striver or really trying to calm that all down, that is so important and so to see these guys have that skill is obviously why they're in that position, because not many people have that, to be able to calm that down, take it away from being screamed at and really channel some, almost like baby, gentling, kind, soft voice work to calm the situation.

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Firstly, how long does it take to build that rapport with your race engineer? And secondly, for you getting in the car in Mexico, you've got someone else's race engineer in your ear, you know, you suddenly have to, for that period, that hour, perform your absolute best with someone you don't know very well. Yeah, you know, what's super special is that, you know, it's not my race engineer, it's not someone that's been talking to me that I've been talking to him over race distances, over sessions. However, I have been listening into every one of their sessions with Pierre and Carol, his engineer, or Josh and Esteban, since Austin last year, and also in every single debrief. So I hear his exact voices turning in high situations, in low, and Carol is similar, you know, they're very, very low, very modest. Thank you very much. And to be honest, actually, Carol, who was Pierre's race engineer, was his last time as a full-time race engineer yesterday. So I will be having John, the performance engineer, as my race engineer. But what has been really cool, upgrades, what is really cool is that the test engineer who I have in my ear for all my A521 testing is now coming on as performance engineer. So I will be able to work with him. I know him very well. He's also an amazing, amazing guy. So at least he'll be something familiar. I speak with John a lot as well. So at least I'm not going into something very foreign. Yeah. And that's also a really good thing. Like you see some junior drivers, they'll sit in a lot of the meetings, but you seem super integrated and you know all the voices. And that's just going to like, how much is that going to be helpful for you just to jump straight in the car and be like, yes, this is a new car with a new team. But yeah, it's like everything is working out to make sure that you can get the most out of that and just flawlessly hop in. Yeah, I think it's so important. I was speaking to a few people over the weekend, every team has to give two sessions to rookie drivers. So in a way, they're taking that away from their driver, from their team activities at the session that, okay, it's mandatory, but we lose FP1, which we think about it, it's a crucial part of the weekend. It's a third of all your running, your testing, the driver also climatizing to the circuit. And Mexico is the allocation, Mexico isn't the easiest driver for the track as well, for confidence, for a number of things. So I'm glad that, you know, I'm very comfortable with the team. I'm well involved. I feel comfortable in F1 machinery as well. So I can try and maximize that session as much as I can for the team, so that we can be running test items, we can use it most beneficially for the rest of the weekend, rather than a session that we're giving it to a rookie driver. It's okay, we're going to have to put that aside and start fresh in FP2. At least I can really try and take some things forward and also work with Esteban to know where we started off and where he's going to be starting in FP2. And I'll be commentating on him in the car in FP1.

Very exciting. I know, exciting.

Only good things, only good things. I'm open to bribes.

Let's move on to a couple of the other big stories from the weekend.

And I want to talk actually about McLaren's success through the lens of Alpine, if that's okay, Jack, because I think, yeah. Well, this is my question to you,

because last year, 2022, Alpine finished fourth ahead of McLaren. And are Alpine looking at what McLaren are doing? And does it inspire Alpine to go, well, look, if that's the turnaround that can happen mid-season, not even in the off-season, mid-season, then where Alpine are now, they can absolutely, within the space of six to eight months, you could be where McLaren are, I guess, at the moment. I think it's an example not only to us, but to everyone of how quickly

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things can turn around, how you can really get your package together. We haven't really been focusing on McLaren too much or anything. You have to obviously accept one of the teams doing well, and they've done really good things, and they're a front-running team, and things could be different if they had that pace at the start of the year. But we're really trying to get everything into order, like they've been doing, and make sure now that we can try and go on that same trajectory, it doesn't happen overnight. They've really managed to do something really special, because no one has really ever been able to do that so quickly and go from being a back market team in Bahrain to now a consistent and consecutive podium finisher. So it's a moment where that's extraordinary. Is that possible? I don't believe something like that. I don't think many teams or anyone else can do that on the grid, but we have to go with what we're doing. We're making the right decisions that we are now to hope that we're going in the right direction. So like you said as well, we have to be real, accept where we are, but we're going in the right direction. We have a great group of people involved, so we don't want to be here either, but we are for the moment. So we're taking the necessary steps to make sure that we go forward, and we try and go in that same direction. Like a view, I mean, I can see later dates from front of you. How have you made sense of McLaren's improvement in Ford? McLaren said this pretty early at the start of the season, like we know we hit missed some targets with efficiency and everything else, and it looks like they've just found a good way to add downforce and remove drag. The holy grail. If you could do both those things, great. And they identified some things they did wrong, and they've done that. And sure enough, since then, that was a big, that was a step change. We saw that around, I guess it was Spain, Austria, you saw McLaren matching the Red Bulls or exceeding the Red Bulls high speed cornering performance, and you're like, this is a serious challenge now. And they still, after that, talked about some of the handling issues they had, especially, you know, through corner balance from entry to apex, which was problematic. But they've, they found that thread, and they've continued to chip away and add to that getting closer and closer and closer to the front. So that's one of the things like those things that you said that don't happen overnight, those philosophy changes, it goes from concept in the virtual world and CFD, then you say, okay, that looks like the right directions, build that in the wind tunnel. Okay, that makes sense. And you still have to go to the track. So teams that have an ability to understand the information from the track, relate that back to their tools, and improve those tools. But the problem I went back to is before is there is a lot of uncertainty over these things. And like sometimes these incremental changes, you're measuring a couple of points of downforce, which are on the edge of what is measurable on track. So sometimes you've got these upgrades, and you're not sure it's an upgrade, and then you keep going down that route. And then yes, in three races, those couple of points are now, all right, we can measure this, whatever the threshold is, this 10 points, we can see that these conditions, we do have that performance, our top speed is improved relative to where it was before for the same configuration. Yes, that is, but it's a long process and it doesn't happen overnight. But McLaren's have definitely found that thread of stuff that's working from understanding what was wrong with the car in the first place. It's quite disappointing though, when I spoke to Alando afterwards and I said,

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can you get a win? And he said, no, I think Cato was our best chance for a win this year. I was like, don't say that. They didn't look so bad here though.

No, they do. I mean, it was a little bit off. I think the tires, one thing for them, being out of sync with everybody else, it made it look a little bit worse than it was. But the performance was not bad. I mean, the only bad thing was just, it was Russell's hard stint in the middle looked really off bad, but everything else like McLaren and Mercedes were probably not dissimilar. And we didn't get to see much from Piastri in the race either.

Not great weekend for him. It was a tough weekend for him, wasn't it?

Yeah. And you've seen it sometimes, a drive that could have been Piastri's where he had the slight edge. So we don't really know. I think, yeah.

It could potentially be in the fact that

Lando's drove that car now for how many years since 2019. He knows when it's outside the window, he knows when it's in the window. Potentially the car wasn't perfect this weekend. It wasn't like it's been in guitar. It wasn't as good as it had been in Japan. And Lando just knows how to get on top of that quicker. He has that relationship with the engineers, with the team, to make sure this is what we're adjusting. I know I can make these modified adjustments in the car. And I can get it back to where it needs to be, where Oscar just, he doesn't have that experience. You can't discredit him at all because he just doesn't have that time. And potentially that is the difference, especially now with you seeing on qualifying on Friday, such close margins. That can be the difference between Lando qualifying on the front row and Oscar being back at the back of the tail end of Q3. So small margins have big consequences, especially at the moment.

Alpine have had a really interesting weekend, Jack. And I say that in terms of who you've managed to get on board with the team. You managed to get Antti Joshua, Roy McElroy, Patrick Mahomes, Trent Alexander-Arnold, all involved in the consortium to...

Travis Kelsey. Travis Kelsey. Yeah, I'm sorry, I have missed off a few. Apologies.

Swiftie. Swiftie, yeah, there we go. Very, very exciting. I thought Esteban's comments were really interesting. Esteban said he thinks it will help him perform better. Can you just unpack that a little bit? What kind of influence does having those names, those sporting names come to a team? What impact does that have on everyone within the team?

I think trying to relate from where he's coming from, currently I'm not in the driver's seat.

I'm not potentially feeling that effect that he is getting from those people. So

trying to really be in his position, you have elite sportsmen and elite athletes coming through

that have all been at the top of their game in their selective sports, who all want 100%,

who want to be winning. So to have people coming to the team that have that mindset,

know that they don't want to be second best, third best, they want to be at the top. So you know

you have that foundation coming through that is hoping and wanting the team to go to the front.

So the more people you can have around like that, the better. So he's feeling that he's going to

have more and more people coming there, pushing the team, wanting it to grow, wanting it to go

further. And for sure as a driver, when you have that environment around you, you're only going

to want to push yourself and want to go further as well. So it's the same when you have the team

that are around you that are okay with doing the band minimum, just getting by that doesn't

boost you as a driver. So I can try and understand from where he's coming from. And

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I think everyone in the team as well will be grateful that they're on board to try and go in the trajectory that we're wanting the team to go in.

Didn't you have lunch with Anthony Joshua?

I had a chicken and mayo sandwich in the middle of yesterday's race briefing.

And it was asking a lot of questions. It's great. He took over my headset, the seat that I found yesterday. And you weren't arguing? I wasn't arguing at all. No, I think if he hold his arm out, potentially I could have sat on that. It's absolutely that these hand is twice the size of my face. On my initial handshake, it literally wrapped around it. So I could have just gone in with a fist and there was no difference because I wasn't grabbing any hand.

He didn't notice your hand?

No, it was just like basically me going in with my index finger. So that was cool. Anyway, I tried to make that at least awkward as possible. But no, he's an awesome guy.

It's great obviously hearing Rory, who we spent with on Saturday and a lot of yesterday, but also Anthony, hearing their stories, hearing their passion to obviously want to get to the front as well. And everyone at a point, you don't start at the top. You have to grow like everything and you have to go forward. So them trying to see where we are now and where we want to be, it's cool. So it's a cool place to be.

Rory, are they less intimidating?

Slightly, yes. Well, a lot.

Both lovely though. Both lovely. I got to meet them both. And he was still eating his chicken sandwich when I spoke to AJ in the play. I think that was his fourth probably.

He needs the protein.

He tends just to fill up his stomachs.

He's an Alpine catering dry. A couple of other big stories. Logan Sargent got points this weekend. And celebrated on his plane, on the plane when he found out.

A little PJ post at the top. I wasn't going to say PJ. I was just going to say plane.

But yeah, he was on a PJ.

We said his plane is unless he owns a commercial airline.

Yeah, I found out. I posted a picture. Bless him.

Yeah. It's great to see that Logan's finally got some points in Formula One and particularly obviously retiring in Qatar. I think that's a nice moment that has happened the week.

Double points for Williams.

Yeah, and double points for Williams as well with Albon and P9.

And the sort of final thing I want to talk to you guys about really is sprint races.

And this was obviously the fifth of the sixth this year.

Let's do a little round the table. I'll start with you, Blake.

How do you feel about sprint races in Formula One?

How successful do you think they've been and what would you do to improve them?

I've got two points of view on this because I spend most of my time watching the races from home, spending a lot of time with my head in the data looking at it.

My initial impression was good. It gives you, as an engineer, I would hate sprint race weekends because you get one session to set up the car. You have to make sure that your simulator preparation

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and all your pre-event work is spot on. And as we discussed before, there is a lot of chaos and uncertainty. So it's difficult. It makes it challenging and throws up unintentional curveballs. For example, Leclerc and Hamilton disqualification, that was very likely a result of that. So that's not the good kind of case. I don't want to see disqualifications, but getting it right or some people getting it wrong, changing the packing order, fantastic.

As far as my point of view as being effectively a fan this weekend and enjoying the race from the outside, I think it was great if you're at the circuit and maybe watching at home. You've got qualifying on Friday, an event where there is an outcome. There is a result, not just circulation of cars. You've got qualifying again on Saturday. You've got a sprint race on Saturday. Then you've got the Grand Prix on Sunday, the main event. It's like this whole thing. But from my point of view, the only question I have is, is there so much as too much of a good thing? I feel as an analyst, I feel overwhelmed. It's literally lots of stuff. After Friday's over, there's a disconnect.

Saturday seems kind of inconsequential. And at the same time, Saturday format doesn't seem different enough from the rest of the weekend. It does feel like a minigame or more of the same, which potentially spoils Sunday in some instances. In this instance, I don't think it did.

But I think a lot of people had favorable views of the sprint weekend because we had chaotic sprint races early in the season, mixed wet, dry sessions, which at the end of the day, the more chaos usually you have, a more entertaining race. So I'm overwhelmed by them.

I feel like there is a bit too much of it as much as I don't like a free practice one, two, three session where it's difficult for a lot of fans to say, what is the result?

Like a free practice too, you do the fastest lap early in the session. And then the rest of the session, they're gathering high fuel data. It's really difficult for fans to on the fly perceive what's their high fuel pace. Even after looking at the data, you don't actually know until you get to Sunday. So that's my way long answer, which I think covers most of the things that I like and dislike about it. As an engineer, you probably hate it.

Yeah, you would hate it. And have it after the difference is we have a reverse grid.

So we reversed our top 10, which probably is a spectator. Yes, when you're driving in the driver's seat, you're like, no, you know, I did a great job. Now I get punished.

Exactly. And what's even worse is you reverse the top 10, you pull it, you start 10th, and then they go, okay, and we're only going to score the top eight. So you start outside the points. So you have to overtake your P2, P3 qualifiers who, you know, are very close in pace. It's not like you're overtaking the other side of the top 10, just to get one point. So Saturday's a tough, no pit stop as well. So it's not that point where you think, oh, I'm starting at the tail end of the top end, I have opportunities to come through, pick these guys off who were particularly not as quick as me. It's, no, it's these guys who you are qualified by a hundred, two hundreds, and you're really trying to make the difference. They're obviously targeting the guys in front. It creates opportunity. It's great. Potentially everyone gets not a trophy, but you know, everyone can come away as a winner. But not talking about Formula two, Formula one, it's created Ferrari potentially being on pole, them seeing better results, because they seem at the moment to be able to roll out the garage with a strong package. They seem, and they seem to be able to have that confidence with the car, the drivers, and that's what enabling them to, I think, to get that pole position on Friday, but not also have that pace on Sunday. It's a, it's a thing of not being able to evolve the car, but the car is pretty strong as it is. And that's

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where then the teams over a full race weekend are able to gather more data, get the car potentially a little bit further out the grid over FP1, FP2, P3, and where they potentially fall behind, where Ferrari is strong. So in that, in that environment, it creates unpredictability, it creates a shakeup, which is potentially good. But also, like I think Max was saying, the sprint race gives you too much predictability, predictability sometimes on how Sunday is going to play out. Everyone knows now who's strong, who's not, how they behave. Exactly.

Unless your Ferrari and you do different strategies with two drivers.

I think everyone knew not to go on that soft for more than one lap. So that was a brave call.

Carlos put his hand up, took the sacrifice. Like you said, I think if they're going to go for the sprint program in my position, I don't really want to elaborate on it too much. But I would like to see them more of a shakeup. I would like to see a bigger difference because not that Saturday is meaningless, but there's very few points on offer. If Saturday goes not ideal, it's not the end of the world. You have Sunday really to get it back together and it's sort of an in-between little area. It'd be great to have a high risk, more points potentially on offer, and something a little bit different because it would create more stress, more environment, and I think the fans would like to see that as well.

Separate championship maybe.

Wheel out the F2 cars and the F1 drivers have a go.

Yes, of course. So that's all I was going to say.

No, it's fine. So I think six sprints, yes, but space them out. We've got three and four races right now and that's too much for anybody. Any advantages or any positives you had from earlier sprints, three and four race weekends is too much for everyone. I think in terms of in the garage, they said they don't mind them, whereas for everyone else, it's a lot more work and it's a lot harder, it's a lot longer days. So I would also pick the tracks really carefully where you're going to have the sprints. Don't just put them all because we need some more audience on that Friday. We'll put a sprint there. Pick them for the racing so that it's much more sensible. We do get a little bit of a shake up and then on the Saturday in the sprints, stick them all in the F2 cars and they'll see who's quickest. Because that's what we want to see and that's one of the things that's lacking in F1 right now is like you do- Who is the best?

As a nature of it being an engineering competition as well and constructors championship, you will have people get it right, get it wrong. And like we said, the path to finding performance takes months, months. So if you start on the wrong foot to close the gap and all we want to know is like, you know, we are always speculating about who's the best driver. It's like, oh yeah, but the car is not as good. Put them in the same car. I mean, that's the age-old argument, isn't it?

That's all we've ever wanted to do is put them all in the same car and see what that this sprint block has done as well. It's made it extremely difficult for the teams to be also put their young drivers in the allocated FB once because everyone's left it so late. And they've realized that, oh, we only have Mexico and Abu Dhabi and Vegas to put our drivers in. No one's going into Vegas. No drivers going to give up Suzuki because it's just, in my opinion, one of the greatest tracks and also an area where you need that running. You need to get the car in the window. So you have Mexico, which isn't ideal. And also it's a year where people are still bringing upgrades. People are still evolving their cars through now instead of before where it slightly goes frozen. And it's a position, yeah, put the young driver in. It's at a stage of the year where

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it doesn't really going to hurt us so much where it's still an important part. And we only have two opportunities. So I agree that they should be spread out more completely on board with at places where it potentially is going to be a benefit and not somewhere where we saw a little bit stale this weekend. Final point. We've got a few minutes left. Mexico, you're going to get behind the wheel of the Alpine. It's Monday today. You'll be doing that on Friday of this week. Just walk me through the next five days. How are you going to spend it? And what are you going to be doing? That's a gulf. Can I rewind actually before we get to that point? Do you get to spend much time in the simulator? I got to spend a day in the simulator. Got to do a start with Abu Dhabi because that's the last place. And we ended with Mexico. So you'd think that you would start with Mexico and with Abu Dhabi, but due to you wanting to end on the sim at the place you're going to be at first. So it's a place that's freshest in your mind. So that was great. To be honest, just to get my head around the circuit. I drove there last day, but a refresher just to know these breaking points, anything more like that. We weren't going into the depth of testing. It was more just for me to get a feeling, which is great. And to be honest, even starting from yesterday afternoon, I was already going through on RaceWatch and F1 TV, looking at Fernandez on boards from last year.

I was obviously in the session, but I only got to do a handful of laps before I had a PU issue. So I wasn't able to do the whole session. So I was looking over Fernandez, looking on board, just seeing, because it's a tricky session, FP1 in Mexico, the track's dusty. We already know how difficult it is from an aero point of view with it being super slippery, not much downforce. So evolving through that session as a driver and being able to take the most out of the track evolving and also you as a driver getting more confidence, I really just wanted to, from now till Friday, see how I can maximize that without also taking much risk. Because at the end of the day, I want to do a great job for the team. I want to tick off these test items and I want to make it most beneficial going forward. Setting a great lap would be awesome. But at the moment, I don't seem to, I think I'm going to do, yeah, don't happen there. I think I got a bit excited in my mind. You were allowed to be excited about getting back in the world. I got a bit excited. My tongue was like, what's going on? Yeah. At the moment, I think I just really am planning on just making it most beneficial for the team. And I think that's what we're trying to do and what we're planning to do. So I get to spend time with engineers today, tomorrow on the charter flight down to Mexico with them. And then on Thursday, we're getting in amongst it. So it's great. The team are trying to make it a really not pressure environment, you know, not putting too much, putting too much on top of it, which I'm not either. So really looking forward to it. It's strange. I do find the FT calendar strange in the sense of you, the last time you raced was Monza. You're not going to be racing in F2 to Labadabi. So it's a big gap, isn't it? It's a massive gap. Yeah. So how are you, like physically, how are you keeping yourself sharp? Yeah, race sharp. Race sharp, yeah. Yeah, race sharp is one thing. And, you know, I've been obviously with a team since then. After Monza went back to Australia before then going to Singapore, Japan, and then with Qatar. And now we're on this loop before Labadabi. I'm really just trying to embed myself in the team as much as possible, as if I'm driving, as if I'm there, trying to not really get out of it. Because to be honest, there isn't much, you know, we can do. So trying to be here, be involved, I think it's the best case scenario. I'm not away from it. I'm not sitting at home, just training in the gym and doing a bit of

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sim for two months. I'm here. I'm amongst it. I'm soaking it up. I'm in the paddock. To be honest, I'm keeping the same mindset as well. And as much as I wouldn't want it to happen, Thursdays and Fridays, I am waking up, putting myself in the position going, okay, I might have to jump in the car, FB3 here and be in. And it's also preparing myself for when that, if that time ever comes, I'm prepared for that. So it's great to be here on this, on the circus as well. I think I'm learning, you know, as I'm going as well, potentially, I feel I'm ready to get in the car. But I mean, as a point of becoming a full-time driver. Well, best of luck. Yeah, thank you very much. I can't wait to commentate on it. There we go. I'll get you that payment. It's the bag of money over there. Yeah, exactly. I think James is going to get it now. Very good. Rachel, Jack, Blake, thank you so much for your time. We're going to be back next Tuesday. I hope you can join us then. Bye for now.