

## [Transcript] Sky Sports F1 Podcast / Will Verstappen win every remaining race? | Second half of the season predictions!

Hello and welcome to the Sky Sports F1 podcast with me, Matt Baker. We are finally almost just about to have F1 cars back on track and help me make some predictions for the second half of the season but also to look ahead to the Dutch Grand Prix. I'm joined by Natalie Pinkham, Damon Hill and former performance engineer to Max Verstappen, now content creator Blake Hincey.

Hello to you all. I guess we should get some pleasantries out the way, how everyone's summer was. Matt, I'll start with you. How was your summer? It's not over, is it? Is it over? I've never started. What are you talking about? It might be. It's over. It was over before it began. It's been about three days this summer, didn't we? Yeah, but listen, I loved it. Loving it will love it. I don't believe it's over. I refuse to believe it's over. So when we were sent back to school, I was remember, oh, summer's over, go back to school and you'd go back and you'd have all your new autumn clothing and stuff like that and you'd be sweating like crazy, you know. It'd be like woolly trousers or something. Ridiculous. It'd be really hot in September. Damon, have you got loads of new threads and pencils and pencil cases and no hats, for example? Yeah, I've sharpened all my pencils for... Well, I haven't been to a race since Austria, I think it was. So that was hot, Austria and sunny. But yeah, so I haven't been for a while and I've never been to Zandvoort for Formula One. So this is going to be fun for me because obviously, it's a max... Well, Bedlam is what I expect it to be like. You know, it'll just be a utter chaos and everything orange. And I know that the guy who's running the event has asked people not to use orange flares, but that's just like an invitation to use orange flares, isn't it? I mean, bring more of them please. Yeah, I mean, so unlikely that's going to happen. But I have very fond memories of Zandvoort because I used to go there in Formula Three. It was one of our way trips for the British Formula Three Championship. We had two races, one was in overseas races, one was at Zandvoort and the other one was Spa. And I won both of them. So I have very happy memories

of Zandvoort. It was slightly in its old configuration, but it was perfect for our three cars and a lovely track to drive on. And when we did it after our testing, we'd go to the beach afterwards. It was fantastic. What a life. Damon, did I remember seeing a tweet where you hit... Did you hit a bird at Zandvoort? Yes. No, there was the first lap. This is very sad. So anyone who's sensitive with regards to anything to do with animals and cruelty and stuff like that, you have to put your fingers in your ears and don't listen to this bit. It's horrible. But basically, we all around did this lovely sweeping hill around the doon around the back. We came round the corner of a fast one at the back to see a family of, I think they were geese or ducks crossing the track. And to my eternal credit, I tried to take avoiding action and took to the grass and you imagine there's five Formula Three cars on the first lap of race suddenly trying to avoid all these ducks crossing the road. So there were a lot of feathers. It was a bit like a pillow fight, unfortunately. So it was a bit tragic. Yes. Yeah, we sadly know how that story ends.

Very good. All right, well, let's move on from that and to more positive things. Because look, we've got the second half of the season coming right up and I'm going to shout out James Galloway. He wrote a brilliant article on the Sky Sports website. So wet your appetite for this for these upcoming races. We've got races on four continents in nine different countries. We've got the first ever Las Vegas Grand Prix, three double headers and one triple header. We've got two street tracks, three sprint weekends, and early morning and prime time

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evening UK races. There is so much to be excited about. Blake, what are you excited about in the second half of the 2023 season? Suzuka, always Suzuka. And Austin and honestly, Vegas looks super exciting. That is going to be a spectacle. Love it or hate it. It's going to be wild.

I don't think I'm going to love it, but I'm looking forward to seeing what it's about.

But yeah, I think that's something to look forward to. And I think some of your questions might lead into some of the other things I'm looking forward to, the best of the rest competition, really. Yes, the non-Max Verstappen championship to coin and take rabbit's phrase. Nat, what about yourself? What are you pumped for for the rest of 2023? I think that's the point, isn't it? Shift it away from the emphasis that is the max domination and accept that is history being made and we'll

look back and reflect and be, well, feel lucky that we were able to witness it, be a part of it, enjoy it. And then, yeah, go full locations over anything else because we are going to some absolutely cracking race tracks. I love Singapore. I love Suzuka. I cannot wait for Vegas. So there is, there's much to enjoy in the latter stages of the season. Damon, Vegas, is that top on your must see list for 2023? We watched Casino, the film, you know, with Robert De Niro and stuff. So Vegas obviously has got a very fruity history and reputation. And so I have been to Vegas once before a couple of years ago in January, something like that. So I hadn't been before. So I'm looking forward to see what it is all about. I mean, it is showbiz capital of the world. And there's all this kind of reputation that it carries with it. And so now Formula One is going to put its head in the lion's mouth and see whether we get spat out or whether they take to it and love it. But the moment that the feeling is that America has really taken to Formula One and they're desperate to get to Vegas. And so it should be a good vibe. So Matt, can I just tell you that we went out to the launch of it last year? And I was slightly reticent about Vegas, you know, big busy casino floors and just kind of claustrophobic and a bit overwhelmed by it all. And my husband's a big fan of Vegas, I can't imagine why. But he has been many, many times. And he said to me, just, oh, just you'll have a great time. Just enjoy it. Go for it. And we all went to this bar on the first night. And I rang him and I said, look, quite frankly, this is really tacky. I don't like it at all. I want to come home. It's terrible. You said, oh, for God's sake, you take yourself way too seriously. Look, I tell you what, I'll tell you a really classy, cool place to go. And it has got a giant chandelier in the middle. And you won't, you can't fail, but to love the place.

As I looked up a sort of giant chandelier above my head, I was already in the one place he said that I would find classy. It was not. And that was the place I rang him from to say it was seriously tacky. Anyway, at that point, I had a change of mindset. I said, you know what, I'm not going to take this too seriously, take it with a massive trowel of salt and have one of the best weekends of my life. After my wedding, my children, we had a blast. It was brilliant. And I think that's the key. You just have to go into it with a very different mindset to anywhere else on planet earth. Kitch is probably a better word. I know what you mean when you say tacky, but maybe. But Blake, you sound like you're from the United States. So you're from America. So you go all the time then, right? I've never been to Vegas. Never been to Vegas. I'm like you. It's one of those places that gambling and all the stuff and the show biz that doesn't really appeal to me. So I'm like, okay, this is going to be this is going to be interesting. But if somebody was like, hey, we'd like to bring you out to the event and I'd be like, oh, yes. No, I totally not going. No, I'm going for sure. Oh, rubber arms over here. You'll be persuaded. Let's just I'm I'm not the

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kind of guy that can afford that kind of event that that's going to be that's going to be a little bit of a spindy event. Honestly, if I could pick one, I'm going to go to Austria or something, you know, have a nice schnitzel in a village somewhere, go ride my bike in the mountains and go watch the races. We offer all sorts of variety of experience with Formula One. Exactly. That's a great thing. I mean, that's Singapore. I mean, it is a it's a fantastic setting. The whole thing looks spectacular. So I think from a visual point of view, it's going to look amazing being held at night at Vegas. Of course, that's when it all comes alive anyway. So it will be brilliant to I don't know what to expect, but I'm sure it's going to be a TV spectacular. Another thing is, is all of those events that are in the city, assuming you're staying near the event, the convenience of walking to and from the circuit as a personnel or a fan or everything else stands vacate after the session, you go straight to a bar or restaurant like Monaco, Singapore, those events are a lot of fun. But I think that is going to say something. Well, my only concern, Blake, is whether we may lose a few people on the way back to the track. If you've got to walk through a casino floor, it could be dangerous. Discipline. Discipline is always important. Do you have it's it's Thursday night. Do you have that extra beer or not? I don't know. Do you have the slot machine for 12 hours? I don't know. Well, given the timings of the race, it's going to be very, very late. Some of those when we actually finished racing, let alone when people are actually going to get to bed. I mean, yeah, it's going to be very interesting. It's definitely going to be as well. The last time we went to Vegas, which was in a car park. Which was far less exciting than doing it along the main street. I would urge our viewers, I don't know if Sky's got the rights to it. But anyway, there was a very brilliant documentary done by Clive James on Vegas. So it's called Clive James Go To Vegas. And that's the last time they had the race there, I think it was. And as you say, it was in the car park. It didn't really work. You know, that nobody knew it was happening. They didn't know what Formula One was. But it is a nevertheless, it's a very watchable documentary. And so a bit of research there for everyone to go and see what happened last time. It was, it's a good story. And for Formula One lovers, it's a brilliant piece of TV. How times have changed now. I don't think anyone in the US will not know that it's happening in Vegas this year. Okay, let's move it on to talk about our predictions then for the rest of the 2023 season. I've got some various categories, which I asked all of you to go away and have a think about. So. Damon, did you? Did you Damon? Yeah, I've done my homework. I just looked at it now. Fire away. Fire away, Matt. Come on. Got me some lines to do after this, Damon. Right, our very first category, and I promise we're not going to spend too long on this, is the winner of the World Championship. I haven't got yours, Damon, but I'm going to guess you're probably going to go with Max. All of us have gone with Max. And I think it's probably now a case of when will he win the world title? You're talking about the constructors, right? Yes. Yeah, and the constructors. Yeah, all of his own. He's good at getting both. He's 125 points clear of second place in the championship. The earliest he could win it is Japan, but that does require quite a few of his competitors or his nearest in second place to have bad weekend. So it's most likely going to be in Qatar, which is also a sprint weekend. So I guess the question now, I'll come to you on this. Could anything get in the way

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of Max Verstappen winning that title as early as Qatar? Do you think it could be pushed back? Is there anything that would push it back to the USA, to Mexico, even to Brazil?

I think the more pertinent question is, is there anything to stop him winning every single race that remains on the calendar? Because he's just in imperious form. I suppose the summer break may have been disruptive. You know, they're clutching at straws there, but some of the opposition may hope that just that little break in momentum may be enough to put him off his stride ever so slightly. I can't see it though. I mean, you know, we're talking about him winning by margins of 30 seconds plus. This is a guy in the form of his life and the car of his life in the car of a generation. And yeah, he's surely going to storm to victory at the soonest possible opportunity that the engines have been spectacular. And it doesn't matter. They can take engine penalties at every event if they wanted to fit new from here on out and still do reasonably well. I don't see anything putting him off. Like Natalie said, it's seriously impressive to watch with that combination of car and driver and confidence level. You'd have to have some pretty messed up stuff happen to derail that train. I think it's a slim chance you could get bored because listening to some of his comments about Formula One is he seems quite negative about having to do any extra work or the amount of flying and stuff he has to do. So you never know. You might just go, oh, I can't be bothered with this anymore and go off and play his computer games in Monaco. But that's a very, very slim chance of that happening. So yeah, there's nothing to stop him, is there really? Like tell me, do you miss him? Do you miss it? And do you miss him? I'll be honest, like working with him was probably one of the easiest drivers I had to work with. The communication loop was super tight. A lot of it was nonverbal. I'd look through the data at night, have a chat with him before he left Friday night. What do you think about this? The tools, talk with GP about the setup and that was it. Do I miss, I don't miss the traveling. That's why I quit traveling at the end of 17. The 19 races looking at 24 races was a lot. And it's a bit different story between Max and Max's sitting here winning world championships and I was at the time performance engineering a second, third place team. And he's, you know, driving effectively on easy mode, not much challenge. And all the races and travel, I get it. But even me, like, I didn't have any aspirations to be like, oh, I have to be a world championship winning engineer. I was like, I do this because it's challenging and interesting. And when it became to rinse repeat, I was like, I'd like another challenge. And that's when I decided to go back to the factory to focus on development rather than operation. I think it's, it is stressful, isn't it for people working and doing all the races? Yeah, I mean, I think a lot of people say, you know, you guys are in a position of privilege. And that's, that is fair. Like, there's not that many opportunities for presenters, broadcasters, engineers and drivers. But at the same time, yes, it is a choice. But it's a very demanding schedule. And there's no, there's no, doesn't look like it's going to ease up anytime soon. Like people are willing to accept more and more content and more races. And yeah, we see teams swapping out engineers, having rotations, mechanics as well. But there's a lot of people like, I think, race engineers, team principals, a lot of your broadcast staff, and hospitality staff, you can't really afford to have lots of people rotating out. So I understand what Max is saying. And it does make sense. You can't rotate the drivers, can you? They've got to stick around for the whole season. That was my question, actually. Will it take its toll on Max? Will that ultimately

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be what calls into his career? Because he just sort of has enough of the, the repetition and the constant flying and being away from home.

How old is he 25? 20? Yeah. I mean, it's talking, we're talking very early burnout, aren't we? If that's the case. I mean, you look at Fernando, who's had incredibly long trip. He had a bit of time out, as did Kimmy. You do wonder whether sometimes these drivers need a, they need a kind of reset year where they kind of go, okay, I want to do all these other things I don't have time for when I'm a Formula One driver. And well, okay, go and do it. And then you'll realize that actually, you really are much more interested in winning Grand Prix and being a Formula One. And the guys who've come back have really kind of, I think they've hit the ground with more enthusiasm than they had before they were, before they were doing it. So I'm not sure about all his talk of getting exhausted and there's too many races. I think that, yeah, it looks great on the outside if you want to break and you want to go on your boat and land around in Ibiza or whatever it is. But until you do it, you know, and then you realize you've got itchy, you got ants in your pants and you want to go again.

I would argue that maybe, you know, when you're, let's say Max is perceiving this to be on easy mode right now, it's like he's got a lot of performance in his pocket. What else is there to strive for other than absolute perfection, you know, 10 out of 10 every weekend, whereas let's say you're driving Mercedes right now, the car's not great, you know, it's still a ways off the championship. Which one of those is, has more hooks to keep you invested? Like Alex Albon sees in this year in the Williams, you know, like that's got to be super motivating, but it's like it doesn't look successful, but at the same time it's like I can see the progress, I can see the trajectory, I can achieve something. So maybe, maybe a couple years in a slower car and lots of challenges would actually reignite some of that. Like do you, your job as a performance engineer, right? So, but did it ever go into the realm of how do we get the driver to think in terms of giving more performance? Or was it not psychology wasn't your thing?

Because I mean, you just touched on something for me, it's quite interesting.

You know, what, where do you get this concentration, this extra input that some drivers seem to just give, I mean Schumacher, Alonso, Senna, these guys just endlessly wanted to win the whole time. Are these things learned or innate? Because I'm not like, for example, I'm not a performance psychologist. We did work with people that came in and out of the teams to talk to the drivers. But you don't usually bring somebody like that in when the driver's doing well. You bring a guy like a person in like that when the driver's struggling with performance consistency. And you say, right, let's, let's look under the, under the bonnet and see what's going on up here. Whereas when you're winning, and you're like, I'm a little bit bored of winning, it's like, you're suffering from being too good right now. Yes. I think it's, I think it's, you've, you touched on the point I was trying to get to, I think it can become, say me, even for the guy who's winning. And they want a challenge and they want to race. They want, they need, I think Senna was interesting when he, Prost retired and he hadn't, and Senna was in his last year of racing, actually. He looked back wistfully at the times when he was, when he had someone to compete in an AMAT, which was Prost, and he'd lost his foil. He didn't want to race against the new guys who were coming up. They didn't really know them, didn't have this kind of motivation to compete against them. And he, he, he needed that foil, that sparring partner. So yeah, maybe it's all just a bit too, it's not all about winning, is it?



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Self-improvement, I think is, I think is a big piece of motivation for a lot of people is if you don't have a, I mean, the only thing now that I can tell is Max's goal is to pull fastest lap, race win, lead as many laps as possible. But when that becomes relatively, like very likely that it's going to happen, what do you have to do? It's like, do I want to put five tenths, six tenths, seven tenths on my teammate and qualifying?

It's also so interesting because it feels like a bit of a game to him because you remember the time when he came in for that late pit stop and he risked it for the sake of the fastest lap. It was almost like him saying, no, no, no, no, I'm not going to let anyone else have this.

Certainly not my teammate, Sergio Perez. And he kind of was toying a bit like a cat with a mouse and saying, no, I have to extract funds somehow, even if it is risking, risking.

Just get the heart rate up a little bit. It's like, is this pit stop going to go right?

Okay, it's good. Let's go.

Exactly. It's obviously clear he's going to win the World Championship this year. I think that's an interesting conversation about the future and perhaps the 2024, 2025, 2026 and thereafter as to whether or not he's going to have that same appetite as needed to win the World Championship. Let's move on to another prediction, runner up in the driver's World Championship. This is probably a little bit closer. There's a few disagreements already that I can see. And Damon, I'm sure you're going to tell me what you've picked as well.

But Nat, go on. Who have you picked for the runner up?

It's controversial, but I'm going to say that Lewis Hamilton will finish runner up. And the reason I say that is because I fear that the Aston Martin decent runner form is over. I think whether it is to do with this flexi wing being outruled or whether they've just gone down a bit of a cul-de-sac in terms of development and it's been exaggerated by the fact that others have gone well, like Sir for McLaren. But I will caveat that with saying that if Perez doesn't finish runner up, he should lose his seat because this is an unbelievable piece of machinery. And I do believe that Perez has the ability, the talent to do it. So if he doesn't, then I'm afraid that that is the end of his career at Red Bull. So I think probably Perez will do it because he has the talent and the car to do it. But I'm just being controversial because I know that Blake...

Yeah, I know that's what we're here for, these season predictions are for that.

And so will Dave.

Well, Blake, you are going to say Perez. I am going to say Perez.

So go on, tell them what.

And no, you should, by the way. So you should.

I also see your point as well, though. If Checo doesn't hang on to P2, rightly so that the Aston looked to have fallen a bit back and the Mercedes has been nothing, if not consistent. So yeah, I think, but I think Perez will runner up the drivers. I think, I think... He has to, surely he has to.

Yeah, this seemed like he had a little, but he had this last year towards after the break.

He had the little slump in form and then came back towards the end of the season and he was fighting. So I don't remember that happening with him in the past. But that's because my memory is not particularly excellent in regards to that. Anything I can look up, I don't bother remembering and I haven't bothered to look that up.

I agree, I agree.

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But yeah, I'm going to be boring and go with Perez. I think that's almost a certainty, but not guaranteed.

I don't think Lewis can get Checo. I'd be amazed if he could overturn his performance.

But you know, Checo, we don't want Checo to have another nightmare middle part of the season like he's had. And I think he's turned a corner a bit. So I think, yeah, I think he'll do it.

Is that even first for Red Bull? He never had a 1-2 in a championship, but I think so.

Winner takes all. It'd be great to see. I mean, I think this is, you know, it's

leading up to them ticking all the boxes, breaking all the records. And I kind of would like to see that happen, honestly, because then it's an historic season and you were there to witness it and they're breaking all the records as they go and we're going into the unknown.

I mean, can you win every race as a team in the championship?

Do you remember the last race of last year when it was between

Charles and Checo for the second place? And they were going into that race and ultimately it was Charles who split the Red Bulls there by just, he finished on 3-0-8 and Perez on 3-0-5.

So it was very close indeed, but you're right. That was their first time going for a 1-2 and

surely, surely it will happen this year. I remember Christian's reaction after that. That was, he sort of had to be grateful for what he had in a way. He would have liked to have got the full sweep, but anyway, he's come back for another go. So maybe this year, well, they'll do it.

Yeah, mixed emotions, wasn't it for the team? I think I've believed a lot of the PR hype

from the end of Spa and I've gone with Alonso because it sounded like,

it sounded like Aston Woods were getting slightly on top of the reason for their dip in form

and I was, I was believing the PR basically. I was thinking, yep, do you know what, if it's

true, if they, if they have understood what's, what's been going on with that car and the

reasons for the downturn in form, maybe second off the season, they can push further forward.

I think individually as well, Alonso is, you know, obviously I think when we come on to talk

about the constructors, you know, it's not a stroll in Alonso and not on the same playing

field. Are they really? I think stroll has not performed at the level that Alonso has this year,

but think about how well Alonso was driving earlier in the year. Monaco, you know, that

quali lap in Monaco was absolutely sensational. I would, yeah, I would, I would, I would really

like to see Alonso fighting up there at least. That'd be great, wouldn't it? He's got the appetite,

the hunger's there, isn't it? We want to see a fight. If there's a fight for something, it'd be

great, you know. But, but I guess also to the point, like, Nat, I didn't even remember that

Leclerc split the Red Bulls last season. Like, that's the one of the things that's like,

I feel like in seasons like this, we need to be even more deliberate about focusing on the fights rather than the outright victories because I didn't remember that was a thing at all.

And that's because you can search it up. So you chose not to remember it.

I know, but it's, it didn't even stand out to me. So it's like, it was just like,

once the conclusion was done, it was Max and Red Bull and that was it.

What Blake does, and I have actually watched your stuff without knowing it was you. So I didn't

ask if it was character, so I've watched it. And, but your analysis of Spa and what, and what

Red Bull were up to there in the race, you know, so your, your, your focus is maybe not on the

race results. It's definitely on the, the technical side of what people are up to.

So I bet you've got incredible recollection to do with strategies or various things like that,

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haven't you? It's what, what you remember is what you're interested in. And so whether people finish

in the championship is not perhaps your main focus, is it? No, no, but that reminds me, like, my first, my first year track side was with Paul at Force India in 2012.

I don't remember who won any of those races at all. I don't remember, you know, it was my focus was

make sure the brakes don't catch on fire, don't run the car out of fuel, and then try to optimize and find performance. And at that point, I was still super, super steep on the learning curve.

So it was learning Paul and GP's conversation, learning the lingo, the learning the language of the sport. And it was like, I don't have time to focus on who's going to win this race. I don't remember. The only thing I remember was, yeah, Maldonado winning Spain that year.

And then the garage burning down. Yeah, that's the only thing I remember from 2012.

It was similar when I started with Sky because these guys, Natalie and Matt and all the crew and everyone at Sky, the most amazing thing is they know everything about everyone.

And I'm when I was racing, I didn't give a damn, but

anyway, where is where is has going to finish? I don't care. They didn't understand, but it doesn't matter. I was not interested in the races. I just want to know where I finished and where my team finished, where my rival finished. That was it. I didn't care about anything else.

So moving on, Matt, I'd like to take over your bat sheets, be fair, leads us on to the constructors champion who's going to who's going to construct his championship. But again, I think we're all going to go Red Bull Blake. You went Red Bull their Max as we alluded to earlier, which I think is quite funny that Natalie stole that one championship by himself.

Have we had a driver win the constructors championship outright before? But if there's been a driver that has qualified to win the constructors before on their own? Yeah. Or is this going to be the most the most points scored relative to the drive? You know, is Max going to be the most in the lead of a championship ever? As Blake was saying, we're having more races than before. So the point thing is a little bit, you have to kind of average it out, compare it to a season, a percentage of a season points available. But I was sort of thinking back to the the dawn of Formula One. And some drivers would have won the constructors on their own, because there wasn't a constructors championship until like 1958. So they brought they brought the constructors in later. Originally, it was purely a driver's championship and a driver could go from one team to another and take the points with him. So that's true. And I would much prefer it to go back to that old system, because I think that would make it really interesting.

Can you imagine? I'm going to drive for Red Bull now. You know, sopping about during the season, that would be brilliant. Once Max locks up the drivers championship, he goes and drives a Torraso and they give you key a couple races in the Red Bull machinery. Okay, so all agree that Red Bull are going to win the constructors championship. Let's move on to talk about the runner up in the constructors championship. Now, Nat, you've gone Mercedes. They've got a decent stretch. I mean, there's still 256 behind Red Bull, which is astonishing, isn't it? So their gap to Red Bull is greater than the total amount of points that they have, which is 247. But I don't know. I just feel like things, there's been a few false dawns, but I feel like things are starting to click at Mercedes. And, you know, just to go along with my Lewis theory about being runner up, I've got to therefore go with Mercedes. And who also hasn't signed his contract as far as we know.



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We had, we always had a joke, like whenever there was a driver signing or contract or something that happened within the teams I was working at, the first place you hear is on the TV or on Twitter or on Autosport. You never hear like an internal publication or anything. It's like, nope. Autosport said it must be true. So, Tanoi in the factory, okay. We've just liked to announce your current driver will no longer be with you. So goodbye. They're leaky. Their factories are very leaky, aren't they? They're very good. You engineers, you'll chat amongst yourselves. I know. And across teams, yeah, it's like, hey, you heard so-and-so's leaving. Shame for that. Oh, well. Sorry, find out.

Blake, tell me why you've put Mercedes as a run-up in the constructors. You can't see the likes of Aston, Ferrari, I mean, even McLaren if they had a stellar, pardon the pun, brilliant final 10 races. You can't see them getting there.

Looking at, we'll come back to most improved and stuff, but I think it looks like McLaren have definitely turned to corner whether or not they can sustain that and develop it because one of the biggest things we look at is we kind of look at the performance of the season like everybody's, the fastest car is stationary. But realistically, everybody's developing the entire time and at some point, the arrow testing restriction will clip into Red Bull's development and they'll shift focus the next year's car. But I think Mercedes have been extremely consistent and on the development curve, but they haven't found any outright huge chunks like Aston found over last season to this season or like McLaren have found since Austria. Like that is a genuinely huge improvement in performance. And if I look at teams that have found the most performance from start up to Spain and then after Spain, Red Bull actually made some reasonable gains in low speed performance. And then it's been McLaren that have found the most performance Mercedes have been very consistent keeping up with the average pace and development. So I don't see them slipping there. They know what they're doing. They are just trying to develop out of a hole from a bad philosophy. And that just takes time. But I think if there's a team that's going to do it is Mercedes.

Damon, what do you make of the fact that, you know, I think when I look at Mercedes, they've got two drivers who are both capable of scoring really good points week on week. And I'm not sure you can say that of some of the other teams. It seems like when you've got George and Lewis in a team together, those are probably the pairing that you'd pick to go forward and score your points consistently. Is that fair? Yeah. And you see them quite often in a race, one, they might be separated a little bit in qualifying, whatever, but one at one point or other will be catching the other. I mean, I think Lewis has kind of stretched the elastic band between him and George a little bit recently, but two very capable drivers, one with huge potential yet to be realized. The other one is there's no doubt about his abilities and he can still deliver. So yeah, very strong pairing. But we're talking about we're talking about the most improved driver. Are we on to that or not? Yeah, we can move on to that. Yes. Yes, please. Please do go on, Damon. Who would you pick as your most improved driver for the rest of 2023? Just don't nick mine. I'm not going to nick anyone's, but I'm going to mention more than one. And I'm going to mention a way of measuring them, let's say, because I mean, let's say, for example, at the start of the season, Max didn't look like he could be Sergio a couple of times. I mean, so he's been proved enormously. You've got, I mean, obviously the obvious candidate is Oscar

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Piastrri, who's a rookie, really, but he's done incredibly well. But you can have someone like Uki Zenoda. Uki Zenoda, you know, he's, I think he's getting stronger. So there's been some improved performances from drivers. Well, I guess the big test for Uki is Daniel, because when there's a lot of noise around Daniel's test and coming back in, Uki probably felt under a fair bit of pressure. What I've noticed with Uki is that he responds really well to it. So when Nick DeFries joined the team at the beginning of the year, he was effectively made number two driver, even though Nick hadn't proved himself within the team, Nick came in above him effectively. And they were told, look, your days are numbered. If you don't perform outperform Nick by the summer break, you know, it could be done for you. And Uki responded magnificently to that. And again, this will happen this time around with Daniel, obviously an established race winner. And it'll be interesting to see how Uki responds. I feel like he's really coming to his own. There was a time where you thought he might be out after his rookie year. And if any, if there was ever an example of giving a rookie a bit more time to really establish themselves, Uki's it. Because they gave him more time and he rewarded them. He's repaid that faith. But that wasn't who you picked. It wasn't who I picked. No, no, who did you pick? No, I went with Alex Albon because I just think again, another example, and I wanted to get your take on this statement about ebbs and flows in terms of your career and how much confidence plays a part in that because really leaving Red Bull was crushing for him. And you could have said he could have just withered away. And his career could have been over. But actually, it feels as if coming into Williams in 2022, dominating Nick Latifi, and now obviously really blossoming into that number one driver role and being a team leader. I mean, James Vowell's called his drive in Canada a champion's drive. It was brilliant to put a Williams in seventh place. A place like Canada was exceptional. And I just think that he's now been talked about for all sorts of different suits in 2025. Great PR for him as well. The fact that everyone's saying, yeah, yeah, yeah, Alex is the name on people's lips. He's a lovely bloke, but he's a tenacious fighter. For me, a big turning point with his career as well. Well, certainly a big marker for the tenacity and commitment and drive of the guy was when he came back from that operation and got back in the car for Singapore. It told you everything you needed to know about the guy. And I just think he's been brilliant this year. Yeah, he really has. Blake, he also picked Alex. Anything you want to add? No, I picked Alex as well for this, for the same reasons that Natalie picked him as well. Because like, I remember when he was demoted from his seat, when I was at Red Bull, he was in the simulator. And I never, you never saw his, you know, he, because he was like, right, we're not driving, but you're going to do simulator work. And it was never like he was, had a chip on his shoulder. He came in, he worked super hard. He had a great attitude and was really focused on helping. And he, he knows that the game is a long game. And his performance is not only good results in the race and a car that's not particularly quick in race pace, but some of his qualifying performances have been, you know, you've got those mixed wet dry conditions where there's one lap and you get one opportunity. It's effectively a one lap shootout in these kinds of conditions when the track is at that perfect condition for one lap. And he usually puts it together. And I was like, that dude is extremely impressive. And honestly, one of the nicest dudes I've met in the paddock genuinely. And Blake, actually, to your point, the fact that his ego didn't prevent him from

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just jumping in the sim and accepting this demotion as such, was also proven by the fact he's remained so close to the team. I mean, he's still very tight with Christian Horner. He hasn't blamed anyone but himself for that demotion. He's taken it on the chin. He's come back stronger. And that's the sign of a truly great sportsman. Yeah, no, he's an awesome dude. And I hope he gets even more opportunities down the road. He's got a lot left to be written. Definitely one of the most chilled guys walking through the paddock, isn't he? Yeah, but you know what? Not when the visor's down. And I think that's the key. Absolutely not. No, no, no.

And the same can be said for Daniel Ricciardo, lovely guys out of the car. But in it, they're ruthless. I've gone for Oscar Piastri as my most improved driver for the rest of 2023. And I've picked him because of purely from the stats point of view. And if you look at the head to head between him and Lando Norris, qualifying record, he's 10-2 down against Lando and the race record, not much better, 9-3 to Lando. I think in the second half of the season, with the way McLaren has been developed, I think that is going to completely change. I think that's probably going to be a lot more even, which, you know, I think Lando just had much better hold of that car. Also, the fact that Oscar hadn't been racing in 2022. He's now had six, well, he's had eight months now, hasn't he, to get to grips with driving again. And yeah, I think that McLaren team are going to be ones to watch for the rest of 2023, which I guess leads us nicely into most improved team.

And Damon, come on, let's get into you. Who have you picked? No, I think you've got it on the money there completely. I think McLaren is the most improved team. I mean, they've looked like they were going to do things and then it sort of withered away and they ended up with, you know, almost qualifying in the back row of the grid for some of the races this year. And then now they are able to get on the front row. And with two fantastic drivers who we've just talked about, I mean, it's easy to get carried away with Oscar. You know, Lando is still, you know, he hasn't lost any of his talent and he's, he's still the guy to beat, I think. So in that team, so they've got a lot of good future ahead of them, I think.

Blake, who did you pick?

I picked, so from last season to this season, Aston Martin was the clear one, but they seem to have fizzled out a little bit and maybe they've had some changes to either flexi-wing or getting lost in some philosophy changes. But I think it's McLaren, by far, like the performance improvements are any way you slice that. It's very clear how much they've improved and looking even digging deeper into the numbers and the data behind it. A lot of teams have struggled to keep up with the development rate of the front runners. Alpha Tauri, Alpha Romeo, even Williams, despite having some good results, like nobody's keeping up with the Red Bull Ferrari and Mercedes are kind of like the teams that are setting the par for development. And Aston Martin have fallen away in the second half, but McLaren's performance change is huge, especially with that driver pairing, which seems to be extremely strong. Yeah, that's, that's a really good improvement, I think. And I think that's the story of the season or the mid-season at least.

Yeah, agreed. And I think actually the season has been very well managed outside the car for McLaren. They spoke from the off about the how they hadn't hit their winter targets,

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so they were able to manage both the fans and the driver's expectations as to what was going to be possible. And then just to come back the way they did. I mean, to think that Lando had three P17s earlier this season, and now he's getting frustrated if he's not on the podium. I mean, this is, this is an exceptional turnaround. It's not unprecedented, but I think it is unprecedented in the hybrid era. I mean, you can look back at the lights of 2003, 2006, 2009, in terms of great comebacks from McLaren themselves, Williams and Honda. But actually, in the hybrid era, has there ever been such a great comeback?

There was the racing point brought the B-spec. I can't remember what year that was. It must have been, yeah, the 2019, they brought the B-spec midseason, which was a big step. But I don't, I don't recall what that jump in performance looked like because McLaren's, yeah, like you said, I did this. So Daniel had a terrible season last year in the Mercedes, in the McLaren, for sure. But this year in the first half of the season, Lando's average finishing position was actually worse than that, or very close to it. So it's like, it's gone from bad to worse. But I think, like you said, it was good that they managed the expectations by saying, you know, technically, we've missed our targets and here's what we're doing to improvement. And I think that was, that was good. Where some teams like, oh, we don't know what's happened. Yeah, it was, it was clever.

Matt, I'm going to, I'm going to throw something in here. I hear what you're saying about Aston Martin, but they haven't improved during the season. They improved over the winter. That's the difference. And very difficult to turn a team around during the season, and that's what Mercedes have done. Sorry, McLaren have done. Mercedes haven't done it, is what I'm actually, they've not, they've not really, but they've done a little bit, but they've not done enough Mercedes. Maybe the expectations are far too high for Mercedes. The difficult thing, Damon, is, is charting the progress relative to others. So you might get a boost. There may be teams that think that they're making real strides, but because others are doing more, it kind of negates at least what the fans see. I mean, it must be frustrating that I think that's to your point, isn't it? How difficult it is to do it in season when races are coming in thick and fast week after week. A 23 race calendar with very little breaks. It's like, don't, we can't even do that. Like, and there's suggestions that McLaren didn't even have a low downforce rear wing to even look at in spot. I don't know if that's true or not, but people saying they opted for the wet setup. It's like, no, we've actually chosen not to do what you typically do. You do high, medium and low downforce wings. They're like, no, we've just gone for high and medium. We didn't have the low one potentially. It's like, that's something about cost cap plus 24 races. You don't have time to do that stuff. So it wasn't specific to them thinking it was going to be wet. There were some suggestions in looking at the rear wings across the season that there potentially wasn't a lower downforce configuration to run. And that's consistent with what I've seen earlier in the season as well, because they got, they got destroyed in the race because get overtaken on the streets by cars that are several tenths slower than you. And then you place sitting duck through sector two, and you can't really come back if you don't have any top speed to fight them with needed to rain all weekend, didn't it? Yeah, I did. I would have enjoyed that. Damon, I definitely would not have enjoyed that. I did feel sorry for you. I know, I did feel sorry for you. Still drying out. It could be wet in Zambot, by the way. I'm bringing my raincoat. Yeah, karma, karma. Right, for a final few categories, we've still got left

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first winner that's not Max Verstappen. So if this, if we assume that Max doesn't win every single race this year, who will be hot on his tails, ready to win? That's a great question.

I have to say, I mean, someone should be taking bets on this one, because we don't, it could be, it could be a number of people, couldn't it? And it could be Max Verstappen, couldn't it? Oh, you mean, you mean, the race is going?

Sergio, do you, excluding Sergio or? No, no, including Sergio. Including Checker. Well, he's going to be Checker then. Okay. Oh dear, how disappointing. I know he was, you're hoping someone other than a Red Bull driver. Yeah, go on. Well, yeah. Well, now you've gone someone other than a Red Bull driver. Okay, let's say excluding a Red Bull. You've gone with Lewis.

I have to be consistent with my theories, don't I? You are very consistent. I mean, he's got to, he's got to win something in order to fight his way up the championship in order for Mercedes to stay second. So if my theories don't make any sense, if I split them. No, that's fair enough. Yeah, Lewis, Lewis, obviously would be a very, very popular winner. Blake, what about, what about you? I, you know, I think there could be probably four drivers that could do it in the cars and in the pace and situations. But like we said before, Max is going to have to suffer a misfortune for anybody to win it outright. Fine. But I think I'm going with Checo as that. But honestly, looking at recent events before the break, you would have said Alonso possibly, Lewis, certainly one of the McLarens. That's impressive. Or one of the Mercedes drivers. But I'm going to go with Checo. That's the point, isn't it, Blake? That we have got that to be excited about. We just don't know. We can't call it. Yeah, exactly. There's always a race, isn't there? There's always a race in a season where, I mean, remember Ocon? Which one did he hungry? Was he? Yeah. I mean, so there's always a race somewhere where somebody completely out the blue wins a race. And this season has been really wet. Like we've had those seasons where we don't get a single wet session or wet race. And it's like, what is this? And we've had so many, my favorite mixed wet qualifying. As an engineer, I hated it as a spectator. I absolutely love it because it's chaos. You have all the teams and drivers and engineers in this state of, they're good because they can predict it and they know exactly what's going to happen. You hit it every time, just like that. But when you have the rain coming in, sessions drying, you don't know which tires to be in, then you have chaos. And I like that. And I hope we get more of that. Zandvoort, please give us some chaos. But at the same time, going back to your point earlier, I would like to see Red Bull destroy the record books so we can look back on this and be like, we were there for that season. That was wild. Honestly, Zandvoort, awash with orange, those fans. I mean, there is nowhere like it. It is phenomenal because, obviously, I'm British, I love going to Silverstone. I love that atmosphere. But there's something about the intensity and the closeness to the track. It feels small and compact and right on the beach. And it's just the party vibe. It's like this festival. I think I told you, Matt, that Crofty and I did the track run last year or the year before on a Thursday and the grandstands were packed and they just bounced from Thursday through to Sunday night. They didn't stop bouncing.

Even on Thursday, yeah. I promise you the grandstands were packed.

I hope they've checked the grandstands because it was some guy who had a rave, some rap prototype person. He was in Italy. They told him to stop encouraging the fans to jump up and down because he had it in Circus Maximus and it think he's destroying this 2,000-year-old



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amphitheater. So I think jumping up and down is... It would be like, what is it, Taylor Swift? Taylor Swift during one of her songs created something on the Richter scale at one of her recent concerts. Anyone read that? Yeah, I can read that. I went and saw Beyoncé at Tottenham with my daughters and I have to say, the whole stadium was vibrating. They had some massively powerful...

Yeah, it's amazing. That stadium is... I might go to see football.

Anyway. Bit of Beyoncé. There you go. Damon Hild, Beyoncé fan.

No, no, no, I'm not. I went surely because of my wife and my daughter's one. I was a bit shocked, to be honest. I'm a bit easily shocked.

Very good, very good. Right, final one. I just put this in as something at the end, just a random prediction for the rest of the season. Anyone want to take the floor? Blake, go on, start with you. What was your random prediction? I'll send it first.

I think McLaren are going to overtake Ferrari and the constructors.

Hmm, that's good. I mean, between... What's between Ferrari and McLaren right now?

46 points. Yeah, it's not that far. That would be a shocker, wouldn't it? Ferrari, oh, they'd all go into a complete meltdown. I'm going to say Alex Albman and Williams is going to win a race. I would love to see that so much. That would bring me the most joy of anything that could happen this season. I see. I'm the bringer of joy. Which race? Go on.

If we had Mystic Damon, which race would it be? I'm going to say Monza, because they need a fast track. They need a slippery track. And actually, he was so gutted to miss out on Monza, that's where Nick jumped in for him. What a story it would be, wasn't it? And he knew that the Williams would go well there. And he had to miss the race. And then that's why we're so determined to come back for Singapore. I'm going to say McLaren's going to get a handful of podiums in the... I don't think that's even that bolder statement prediction, but I think they will. I think Oscar and Lando will be on the podium before the season's out. It's a completely left field thing, is it Matt?

Anything else? Let's say... It can be anything. Lewis decides to retire. That would be a shock.

Who takes the second seat if Lewis steps out at the end of the season? Who's racing alongside George? Great question. Watch that space. Yeah. Thank you very much, everyone. Really appreciate your company. That was very, very good. I think some interesting predictions. We will probably look back on them as we do with all predictions ago. What a load of rubbish. I can't believe we thought that. That was so silly. But that was good fun to do, isn't it? Yeah, speak for myself, exactly. Thank you very much for your company. Really appreciate it. Not long to go until we see F1 cars back on track in Holland. We can't wait. I hope you can join us across all of SkySports F1 this weekend over at the Dutch Grand Prix. Until next Tuesday, when we're back for the podcast, it's bye for now.