



FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DE L' AUTOMOBILE

2017 FIA Formula One World Championship

Azerbaijan Grand Prix

Friday Press Conference Transcript

PART ONE: TEAM REPRESENTATIVES – Cyril ABITEBOUL (Renault), Eric BOULLIER (McLaren), Robert FERNLEY (Force India)

PRESS CONFERENCE

Q: Eric, if I could start with you, we saw another engine failure for Fernando Alonso this afternoon... you're shaking your head.

Eric BOULLIER: Yes, it wasn't an engine failure. It was a gearbox failure.

Q: A gearbox failure, but regarding that thorny subject of Honda. The regularity of the criticism from McLaren senior management suggests that the situation is now irretrievable. Is there anything that can be done to repair the relationship?

EB: Well, first of all, your question is a suggestion, as you said, which is not exactly the truth or the case. Both organisations are working very, very hard to get to where we want to be. The level of friction, let's say, if there is any, is a little bit exacerbated by the media. It is true that we have to deliver what we need to do, we have to be where we want to be but both organisations are working hard to deliver and I don't think there is such a drama like in your questions.

Q: But Eric, both you and Zak Brown have said it's not good enough what Honda are doing. So what have Honda got to do to satisfy you, McLaren?

EB: Well, we have to compete these guys, not to be in the back of the grid. As a partner we expect obviously a certain level of performance, not commitment, because they have that in terms of resources, it's just a level of performance and today we need another step, a big step.

Q: And have Honda given any indication as to when the next big step will come?

EB: Yes, they have some plan and obviously they will be able to respect them.

Q: OK, let's talk drivers then. How does the state of flux, if I can call it that, leave you regarding driver for 2018?

EB: Well, we don't have any contract with Fernando. Fernando has been very clear. He likes the team, he would like to stay with us, but we need to be competitive. So there is also... say, after summer he will take his decision, so we know the agenda, the calendar for us, what we have to do and Alonso knows what he has to do as well.

And Stoffel?

EB: Stoffel is a long-term contract with McLaren, so there is not any concern for the future.

Q: Final question for now. How do you assess the performance of the car this weekend in Baku?

EB: Well, the global performance is very easy, you just see the lap time. We are very slow this weekend; we were expecting to be slow. Then, if you want to be more in detail, we all have GPS traces of each, this is shared data between all the teams so then you can work more about where you need to improve your car in terms of performance.

Q: Bob, that accident involving Sergio Perez in that first practice session: what are the ramifications of that crash, is there much damage to the car?

Robert FERNLEY: The damage wasn't quite as bad as we thought. The credit goes to the team really for that. They were very well prepared and we were able to effect what were considerable repairs in a very short period of time, so a more than credible effort by the team.

Q: Let's cast our minds two weeks, to the Canadian Grand Prix. Quite a lot of controversy after the race regarding team orders, so can you give us your version of events about those closing laps in Montreal?

RF: Well, we don't run team orders to race, which we did. If you look at the difference in tyre performance it's very, very small. If you at Checo's history of being able to pass other drivers, it's incredibly high, and he felt he had the opportunity to do so. From our side, there was a suggestion to let us have a turnaround, but he felt quite confident and we were happy to back that and support that, and we will continue to do so.

Q: Was there a feeling in the team afterwards that somehow Sergio was wrong?

RF: No, I don't think so. You can speculate many, many things in terms of what ifs, and hindsight is wonderful, but in reality we were dealing with a Red Bull and we mustn't underestimate it. A Force India trying to pass a Red Bull isn't the easiest of things. And we had Ferraris coming back and whether we had pitted or not pitted there is a second a lap difference on optimum, optimum. I think we did the best we could and I have had no recriminations from the team whatsoever and we will continue to follow that path and evaluate things on a race-by-race basis.

Q: Vijay Mallya said after the race that there would be some new rules of engagement from Baku onwards. What are those rules?

RF: No I don't think he said that. He said he would look at the rules of engagement and we discussed it at the management meetings, which we normally do, and what I am telling you now I think are Vijay's sentiments entirely.

Q: Cyril, let's also start with the on-track action as well. We saw an accident involving Jolyon Palmer today. What is the situation with Jolyon regarding his future? What does he have to do to keep his seat at Renault?

Cyril ABITEBOUL: I think it's a bit unfair to link today and the future. Today we saw a lot of drivers going a bit outside of the track – a lot, and I mean a lot. Clearly, indeed, Jo has been one of those at a Turn that unfortunately doesn't forgive, unlike other turns. Which means there is a bit of damage on the car but it's not huge. Not really different to what Checo did this morning. If you want to link that to the bigger picture for Jo, our situation is very clear: he has a contract with us; we are completely committed to helping him get through the period, which is a tough period, that's obvious. He has no ultimatum, but having said that he has to deliver, like every single member of the team. But I think what will help him is that frankly we take him out of the spotlight under which he is constantly, in

particular in starting the first day, Friday, and all the media focus, all the media attention, is not necessarily helping. Obviously you have to do what you have to do, and ask the questions, which you feel are the right ones. But that doesn't help. That's part of the job, part of the pressure that every Formula One driver has to go through. He has to live with that. We are trying our best to protect him but at the same time to do the best as a team to explain to him what we are expecting and we had that type of conversation with him yesterday – go through the metrics and try to define the targets short to medium terms so that he can improve. So that's the situation really.

Q: And can you just clarify the situation with Robert Kubica. He tested with the team just prior to the Canadian Grand Prix. Why did the test come about and is he going to be testing in FP1 ahead of the Italian Grand Prix?

CA: Easy answer on the last one – no, absolutely not. I don't know where this is coming from and I can completely wipe that one out. Also I would like to make it clear that I guess the questions are unconnected – the question regarding Jo and the question regarding Robert. Robert has been a family member of the Enstone team, and Eric on my right knows what I mean. He has been very close and very loyal. The team in Enstone, which is a very small group of people, actually have been very loyal to a number of drivers. In particular Robert made a huge impression on people who've been around, Alan Permane, Bob Bell, Ricardo on the Vire side. People feel very loyal and feel they owe something to Robert for making something big in their life and there was this opportunity that we gave to him, that we could afford to him to drive again, because it was actually a marketing event that got cancelled, so we had a car available at the track and we offered that opportunity to him. Robert is going through some form of programme to try to understand what he can do. He has been driving a number of cars, Formula E, GP3, F2, LMP2, you name it, so I think he wants to understand what he can do as part of his sort of rehabilitation programme. We'll see. There is nothing else that is planned for the time being, apart from a marketing event at Goodwood, where he will be driving the same car, E20, in front of Lord March's house.

Q: Just looking at performance, you said recently there are no magic bullets in Formula One. How should we translate that comment?

CA: Yeah, I think I was trying to make reference and clarify the situation regarding engine upgrades and actually it's not so easy to be clear in that respect. Just to make it clear, I think there was some speculation, some expectation that we do on the engine side this year the same thing that we did last year, with a major upgrade that was very visible to everyone, particularly our customers and I think there was this sort of expectation that we were about to do the same. No, unfortunately it's not happening. But I'm not saying that because it's not happening that there won't be any improvement. There is improvement. For instance, this weekend, we have two tenths of an upgrade in the engine. We were not expecting to make huge publicity on that but I feel that I have to make that clarification. And that upgrade is coming despite the fact that we are not changing the engine. That's why it's important to disconnect the different aspects. It would be the same thing on the chassis side. We are having a sort of arms race. All teams are bringing big upgrades, we are doing the same but same thing as on the engine, there won't be a golden bullet.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Q: (Ben Edwards – Channel 4) Bob, can I just ask quick question about the accident this morning for Sergio. We saw the wheel come off but it certainly didn't look like the tether failed because it didn't look like that was involved in that – so can you just explain what happened with the wheel coming off?

RF: It's not something we've seen before. As you rightly say, the entire wheel came off the hub. We need to look into it to see. The tethers were fine. It's the first time I've ever seen

that. In fact Eric and I were talking about it coming up – he hadn't seen anything like it either. We'll just have to have a look at what that is and make sure if there needs to be any changes across the board for Formula One.

Q: (Ben Edwards – Channel 4) Eric, quick question about Stoffel's season so far. Obviously, it's not been an ideal season for him – it's always tough being up against Fernando – but can you talk us through his season and what has been his struggles and what he's going through?

EB: First of all, he's had a lot of issues with his cars since the beginning of the season. Not only the engine but also the car. A lot of little glitches y'know that stop him, let's say, doing complete runs during free practices and various qualifyings. I think his confidence level then went a little bit lower – that's why a couple of times in qualifying he was not ready to deliver on the first lap and that cost him actually a Q2 because there was a yellow flag or something else. I think it's just for him to find his place in the team to make sure he can voice his needs to setup the car the way he likes to drive it. Formula One is also a bit different when you talk about driving style so you need to maybe both need to move toward each other. We are now since a couple of races addressing this seriously with a working group around him – his engineers first but some others, trying to address this and get his confidence back.

Q: (Gunel Safarova – BBC Azerbaijan) So you say today three accidents happened. It's interesting, why do you think these accidents happened so much. At the moment there is speculation this road in Baku is very dangerous and it has very dangerous turns. Do you think it's because of this?

CA: We've seen a lot of accidents and also our drivers escaping from accidents. Frankly I think we should put a bit more walls to create a bit more penalty and incentivise the drives to stay on track. I think there is a combination. I understand that it is not easy on some corners actually to see with the sun in the drivers' eyes, struggling to see the apex. That's one, another thing to take into consideration, without wanting to start a debate, it's maybe the grip from tyres which is maybe not where it should be for a track like that and the sort of braking energy that you need to dissipate. So that might be an explanation – maybe more than last year in particular with the shift in compounds that we've seen this season. That might be one explanation also.

Eric or Bob, do you have anything to add?

EB: Cyril answered mostly. The only reason why you have got these cars going into the escape road is just because of the grip and the braking energy. Track is also very green today, obviously a lot of dust everywhere, so this is even more difficult to generate some energy in the tyres.

Q: Bob, Pérez, why did he crash, what did he say when he got back to the garage?

RF: I don't think it was anything to do with them. He was trying to find the limit and found it! I agree with Eric and Cyril. It's about tyres – and obviously the track was green. Tyres are probably a little bit hard compound. And maybe next year we'll start going softer.

PART TWO

TEAM REPRESENTATIVES: Jock CLEAR (Ferrari), Rob SMEDLEY (Williams), Beat ZEHNDER (Sauber)

Q: Jock, can we start by talking about the car? What's the standout characteristic of the SF70H?

Jock CLEAR: I think we could say that the standout characteristic is that there is no standout characteristic. It just seems to be a very well-behaved car in all areas. The drivers are certainly giving us good feedback in all conditions, all circuits: slow speed, high speed, medium speed. So, it's a very benign car, let's say.

Q: Is it bringing the best out of both Kimi and Sebastian?

JC: I think so. I think they're both very happy with the feel they have for it. For getting into the car. Certainly, drivers like to have a car they feel they can attack, especially in qualifying: if they feel they can attack a qualifying lap, and have confidence in the car, and I think from day one – day zero in this car in pre-season – both of the drivers have said that it just gives them a lot of confidence when they're in the car.

Q: And it's day one here in Baku. How do you assess your pace so far this weekend? Fourth and fifth this afternoon. Sebastian in particular looked very quick in his long run...

JC: Yeah, I think Fridays are notoriously difficult to read the exact picture from and I think we've all understood that here in Baku with a street circuit that's taking a while to clean up and a very tricky grip level, getting a clean lap certainly on those short runs, on 'low-fuel' was very difficult for people – so I don't think the ultimate lap times you see there are particularly representative for many of the cars. I think they all feel they could have got a better lap in there. Perhaps more representative is the long-run pace and, yeah, we're very comfortable with where we're at. Again the car felt good and it's behaving and everything's under control, so we're happy with today.

Q: And looking specifically at your battle with Mercedes this year, on a day when both you and them are on song – who has the faster car?

JC: I think that's impossible to say. I was just saying to some of the journalists outside, it hangs on tiny margins and I think when you're spending 1m20s going at over 200km/h around a circuit, those tiny margins can be anywhere at any time, and I think we both have cars that are very, very well-matched in most conditions and we've got four very, very good drivers in the Mercedes and the Ferrari and actually, on any given day, any of them are capable of putting it on the front row and putting it on pole. The races we've seen so far, again they swing on very fine margins of exactly what sort of tyre degradation you can get out of the first qualifying set, or how well you can work the Option tyre, and that makes the difference. And it is tiny margins.

Q: Beat, the last few years have been difficult for Sauber and just when some stability seemed to be emerging it's all change again. Can you give us a picture from inside the team about what's going on?

Beat ZEHNDER: No, I cannot, no. You've seen the official press statement from Mr Picci and it seems that Mr Picci and Mrs Kaltborn had different views how to operate the company. We shouldn't forget that it's not only a race team, it's a home team as well with 350 people or so, but I cannot give you more information because I'm not actively involved in that decision.

Q: So who is running the show this weekend in Azerbaijan?

BZ: We've been – Jorg Zander, the technical director and myself – we've been entrusted to run the operation of the team this weekend but this is only temporary. It doesn't change a lot for us because our job is to have two cars running as quickly as possible around the circuit and for me it's a little bit more media work.

Q: When can we expect news about a new team principal?

BZ: I hope soon. We were talking to some candidates and I hope we can announce it sooner rather than later.

Q: OK, on a different note, have you started with Honda yet? It was announced a couple of months ago that you are going to work with them next year. Have you had engineers go to Japan and vice versa?

BZ: Yeah of course. We have started with the project and there is an exchange of information on the logistical side, on the set-up side and the garages. We have to organise computers and IT stuff and things like this so the work has started, yes.

Q: Rob, there are changes at Sauber, there have been changes at Williams this year as well, notably Paddy Lowe coming in as the technical chief. Can you just explain the impact he's had on the team, any new processes he's brought in?

Rob SMEDLEY: Well, it's been positive, it's definitely been positive. Paddy comes with a great pedigree of working in teams that, if they weren't winning, they were certainly expected to win for the past probably about 30 years. He's got 30 years of experience. We were adding up between us that we've got 50 years of experience, but it's a bit more biased towards him so he's got the 30, I've got the 20. But it's been really really positive. He's a very collaborative guy, he's super intelligent, obviously and he has a great deal of experience and it's just about him instilling that culture into the team of how to win really. That's probably one of the biggest things that we need to pick up on at Williams is not only that we want to win – that it's implicit. If you take 60 people around the world 21 times a year you want to win, of course you want to win but it's how to win and then it's putting those processes in place and you can't really put a timeline on it – or it's difficult to put a timeline on it but certainly we're initiating those processes, we're starting them or they've already started, a lot of them. And then it's when and how those processes bear fruit. Some of them will immediately be very visible to the outside and some of them less so. Formula One is very much about marginal gains and it's just about the marginal gains that we need to make now but he's been very positive with the team, a real good breath of fresh air.

Q: OK, so marginal gains there but also huge gains it seems for Lance Stroll. It's amazing what a couple of points can do, him finishing ninth in Montreal last time out, sixth fastest in second practice here in Baku this afternoon. It seems like he's got the monkey off his back.

RS: Yeah, possibly. For younger drivers is predominantly about confidence. Once they start to get that confidence then they get into a virtuous circle if you like and I think within the team, certainly the more senior members of the team, it's always been apparent that the talent is there and we have been making progress but it's just that that progress is not always visible to the outside world. You've got a guy on the other side of the garage who's got 16 years of experience, who was one point away from being a World Champion, he's nobody's fool. He's one of the quickest guys in Formula One still and you're being measured against him every other weekend and it's tough because Formula One cars – especially this generation of Formula One cars – they're generally quite difficult to drive. I think all of the drivers will attest to that and it's just about acclimatising yourself in this environment: in the car, in the actual environment, because everything that you've done before, including Formula Three in Lance's case, is just a huge huge step away from Formula One. There's Formula One and there's everything else in terms of how difficult it is. So we've got to expect that it's going to take some time, he's going to take some time to acclimatise to it and he is doing... he's making progress from Australia to practice today, he's made progress. And as I said, some of that's visible to the outside world and some of it isn't but certainly what we saw in Canada was visible to the outside world and that helped.

Q: Does he seem more relaxed this weekend?

RS: Definitely, I think he gets more and more relaxed... more and more comfortable probably is a better way of putting it, as the events go on and of course he would. The first time you walk in the paddock in Australia as an 18-year old rookie, that's difficult. I wouldn't like to have walked in as an 18-year old engineer – thankfully I never did – but certainly as an 18-year old driver, I think that must be hugely difficult with all the pressures that not only go on inside the car but outside the car as well and he's just got more and more comfortable, more and more comfortable, more and more relaxed and more and more confident and with that, the results start coming.

Q: And just a word on your pace this weekend; what do you think you can achieve?

RS: Yeah, it would be – for where we are at the minute – it would nice to be the fourth quickest car, I think that's got to be our target for 2017 in Azerbaijan, at least. I think Ferrari and Mercedes are having their fight out at the front and hopefully that's going to be another good one this weekend. Red Bull are probably – with the development that they're putting on their car – are a little bit far in front but I would like to see a good fight between us and Force India. Certainly Force India appear to have their car hooked up quite well around here as they did last year as well so that's going to be quite a fight for us but we've got two good drivers, one who's emerging as a very good driver in the car and hopefully we can have a good fight with them.

Q: Jock, do you feel that Red Bull are in the mix this weekend? Is their pace genuine?

JC: Well yeah, you only have to look at today and the lap times you see at the top of the sheets today are not one-offs. As I say, FP1, FP2 are generally not a true reflection on where things end up on a Saturday and a Sunday but if you pick through the details of it, you can clearly see the cars that are hooked up, as Rob says, and the Force India is certainly one of them and Red Bull is certainly one of them and indeed the Williams looked quite quick today as well so there's a number of cars at the front today.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Q: (Ben Edwards – Channel 4) Jock and Rob, from an engineering point of view, we saw a lot of cars going off today. Clearly the demands of the track were very particular and the tyres perhaps weren't working. Can you just talk us through the difficulties of getting through today and what you see improving tomorrow as the track rubbers in?

Who's first, Jock?

RS: Old Jock has more experience.

BZ: For twenty years.

RS: No, no, he's more got experience of cars going off!

JC: I think you've got a street circuit that's obviously very dirty to start with and taking time to clean up. We saw a huge amount of track evolution last year and as such the grip level is low but as we've seen a number of times this year, getting warm-up certainly in the front tyres is really tough and that's always a challenge in qualifying but certainly today it's been very challenging to get some temperature in those front tyres. All the time there's no grip, you don't get any grip, you can't brake late, you can't get any energy in the tyres and when they don't get hot they don't have any grip so you're in this vicious cycle of not being able to get the fronts to work so to speak and that's certainly what our drivers were reporting early on in their runs until you get into a good six, seven, eight lap run where the tyres

starting to get some heat in them. It is all about tyre temperature and that's been the story of many many qualifying's this year so far and all you're seeing today is a manifestation of that issue really, on a track that's very dirty. I think it will be a lot grippier tomorrow and even grippier again on Sunday, so less issues, I think.

RS: I think Jock's explained it very eloquently. I think what possibly exaggerates it is the run-offs here. The run-offs are quite narrow and you can't spin turn the car so when a driver does go off, as Jock says, they lock the inside front and then they've got to bail out at that point. You can't try and make the corner because there's a wall on the other side so you have to bail out and go straight on and once you get down the escape road it's then a bit of a chore to get out because they've got to reverse out, so you saw almost every single driver today using their reverse and that just takes time and double waved yellows come out and because of that, it's the vicious circle that I think Jock mentioned which is that then the drivers are doing slower laps and later on, very quickly after the track will go green but then it happens again because people have lost tyre temperature so it is pretty much as Jock said, just about tyre temperature.

Ends