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Selected 2010 Reports

V DE V – RAW POWER

November 2010

My 2010 calendar ended in Estoril (as it always does) with V de V Les 6 Heures D'Estoril GT (6 Hours of Estoril GT) endurance race. It was also the first night race I've ever been to so it left me curious and wanting to attend 24 Heures du Mans otherwise known as Le Mans 24 hours.

The starting grid in V de V is composed of some pretty exotic vehicles, such as Mosler MT 900 and Volvo Touring Cup TC10; also in the mix are various Porsche GT cars, the obligatory Ferrari F430 (with its awesome engine noise), Ginetta G50, Aston Martin Vantage, Viper GT3, my personal favourite BMW M3 GT4, and Lamborghini Gallardo. There was one (new) Mégane Trophy car that didn't take part in the race as it was parked in the paddock with a missing rear end – not sure what's happened to it; I wasn't at the circuit for Free Practice and Qualifying.

V de V Sports appears to be a family affair with series founder Eric van de Vyver and his son sharing driving duties in the massive Mosler car. I was supposed to meet with Laure van de Vyver who apparently takes care of the organisational side of things but I missed her in the paddock and then it was a bit late, besides my obsession with photography often leaves me no time for conversations. Sorry about that Laure... better luck next time.

Anyway, endurance racing is really cool, it allows you to study the cars properly, have some fun, have lunch, catch up with on-track action once again, have a cup of coffee and return just in time for final pit stops and run to the chequered flag.

I was able to check out circuit's own bar whose walls were covered with lovely posters and memorabilia. The inaugural A1 race poster from 2005 was there with Verstappen, Yoong and Piquet Jr. all billed as the main stars. Where are they now I

wonder? I attended that event but I seem to recall ticket prices were bigger than in F1 (which partly explains why A1 now stinks to high heaven), luckily Estoril provides you with a lot of free views so I was able to see the many past and future F1 rejects in full splendour. A couple of trackside photographers were impressed with Piquet Jr. and were expressing themselves very loudly along the lines of Jr. one day kicking some mighty a\$\$ in F1. Well, we all know what he kicked and where. I think that wall in Singapore should be named after NP just like the Wall of Champions in Canada is named after F1 Hall of Fame. I can't remember whether Nelson kicked that one too, I mean he was British F3 champion so he had the right to do it. I've nothing against the poor bastard to be honest, some management mismanagement spoilt his F1 career beyond repair.

Back to V de V now, the race was good fun with the safety car period adding to the overall excitement when the rain started to fall 2 hours from the end. Pit stops then followed with a couple of bumpers being ripped off in the next few laps. You have admire these guys as they spend quite a bit of money on their cars. It's not Formula 1 but you need a good budget to go racing on 8 different tracks across Europe. The event was simply action-packed compared to Iber GT.

For me it was also a good chance to experiment with night photography. I didn't bring a tripod with me (unfortunately) so I had to use walls as artificial tripods so to speak. Still, the result is quite entertaining. Podium ceremony looks more like a grunge concert with Cobain and Co. smashing guitars! I'm using simple Fuji cameras, they are nothing like professional equipment but I manage to work my way around certain limitations. I mean it's a conscious choice: I operate on a very tight budget so I need more money to move around Europe. If I bought a good camera, I'd have no cash to go to races! It's a bloody tightrope.

To sum it all up, I had a lovely time. V de V competition visits Italy, Spain, Portugal, and France so it's your chance to feel the raw power of GT monsters and various sports prototypes. Don't miss it!

Q&A with V de V Sports Founder Eric Van de Vyver

Q: Combien de constructeurs participent à V de V, et qui sont-ils?

EVDEV: En Proto: Norma, Ligier, Juno, Wolf, Merlin, Funyo, Radical, BioRacing.

En GT: Porsche, Ferrari, Mosler, Lamborghini, Viper, BMW, Aston Martin, Racecar, Corvette, GC 10, Solution F, Renault, etc..

Q: Le sport automobile est une discipline qui requiert énormément de sponsors, et un budget conséquent. Quels conseils donneriez-vous à ceux qui souhaiteraient créer une compétition comme V de V?

EVDEV: Il faut avant tout être passionné.

Q: Durant la saison 2010, vous avez couru sur huit circuits différents. Lequel est votre préféré et pour quelle raison?

EVDEV: Le Mugello: un tracé fantastique!

Q: Quelle relation entretient V de V avec la FFSA, notamment en terme de réglementation?

EVDEV: Nous entretenons des relations privilégiées quant à l'élaboration de nos règlements.

Q: Il semble que V de V soit une véritable affaire de famille. Quels sont les avantages et inconvénients d'une telle association?

EVDEV: Avantages: la confiance et le plaisir d'être en famille. Inconvénients: être le père de Laure, Guillaume, et Charles et le mari de Carine.

Q: Il apparait également que V de V représente avant tout le témoignage d'une passion pour le sport automobile. Pensez-vous que la passion se perde dans les séries surmédialisées telles que le DTM, Le Mans ou même la F1?

EVDEV: Il n'y a plus beaucoup de sport, il n'y a plus que l'argent qui compte surtout en F1 et DTM.

Q: Quelle différence majeure sépare de telles séries de compétitions comme V de V, selon vous?

EVDEV: L'argent!

BRIDGESTONE MOTORSPORT INTERVIEW

October 2010

I've always admired the world motorcycle racing and MotoGP in particular so I was thrilled with fantastic opportunity to visit MotoGP paddock during this month's Portuguese race in Estoril. In addition, I'd be given a tour of Bridgestone Motorsport's facilities and get an insight into the behind-the-scenes action that takes place away from the cameras.

After battling with Lisbon's huge traffic jams for about an hour or so on Friday, I finally arrived at the circuit and collected my paddock pass from the accreditation centre. As I made my way towards Bridgestone hospitality area, the rain started to fall with such intensity that I was soaking wet by the time I got there (I eventually had to change my underwear in a toilet cabin - that's the glamour of motorsport for you). I usually keep my mobile phone in the front pocket of my jeans so I tried to make sure my "little friend" was OK - it survived the nasty weather attack by the skin of its teeth if it ever had them... Luckily for me, one of Bridgestone press officers was on-hand to offer me a cup of strong hot coffee which saved my life.

The torrential rain refused to stop for another couple of hours so we sat down in the comfort of Bridgestone motorhome, watched riders mastering the tricky conditions on TV (it was impossible to go outside) and discussed a number of things with impressive MotoGP engines roaring in the background. It was a very pleasant chat indeed and I'd like to offer you a small summary (I can't fit everything here, otherwise it'll resemble a novel).

Bridgestone brings 600 tyres to each MotoGP race so how much time does it take to produce them?

To put a time scale on it would be a bit tricky because only 10,000 tyres are produced for MotoGP in the whole year. It also takes a lot longer to make a MotoGP tyre than a normal motorcycle road tyre, the main reason being that MotoGP tyres are made by hand and go through various stages of quality control: it takes a few people quite a long time to make each tyre and guarantee each tyre performs correctly in demanding conditions.

What do you do with used tyres?

Used tyres normally go back to Germany (where Bridgestone MotoGP base is) and then some are sent to Japan in order to obtain more data from the used tyres, this includes chemical testing and studying parts of tyres under the microscope (wow!) to determine how they handled the heat, etc.. After this, most tyres are destroyed (melted down), Bridgestone can't give them away to the fans because of the technology and the expertise involved. One of the interesting end results of melted rubber is protective floor for children's playgrounds.

(Children, next time you play outside please remember that you're maybe stamping your feet on Lorenzo's championship winning tyres.)

Bridgestone truck drivers in MotoGP also work as tyre technicians but is it the same in F1?

Yes, it's the same in Formula 1. Truck drivers will always double up: they drive the trucks to the circuit and then they're responsible for setting up the tents, fitting area and moving all tyre fitting machines into place. They also go into the garages to take tyre temperatures (the same applies to F1). There's basically no such thing as a standard truck driver in motorsport.

Tyre war - is it good or bad? Maybe it can happen in the future?

When (at the end of 2008) Bridgestone was appointed as the MotoGP Official Tyre Supplier for a period of three years, supplying tyres and support to every team and rider on the grid, one of the things we said was, "We'll miss tyre competition!" Generally, tyre competition is good for manufacturers because you have the opportunity to beat your rival on track which later translates into sales in the market place. Being a single tyre supplier makes everything less news-worthy, less exciting

for media. On the other hand, we can use riders (drivers in F1) for marketing purposes - this is a benefit of the situation and one way to make more impact.

In Japan, for example, we had a big programme where we used almost every rider on the grid: it included rider parties, rider appearances with people like Valentino Rossi, Colin Edwards, Ben Spies, Marco Simoncelli and many others who all came to meet the fans and sign some items for them. Riders are also important for us because they help Bridgestone develop racing tyres, we listen to the riders and then come up with something that works. This technology is later used in road tyres.

Your funniest moment in the paddock so far?

Well, actually this is quite a funny moment now since my trousers are soaked and my feet are wet... But I remember this one moment about two years ago in Sepang when they found a mongoose that had climbed into one of the teams' flight cases and had fallen asleep in the airbox of the bike where it had made a little nest for itself. There are so many legendary stories in the paddock, it's just impossible to recount all of them. Riders are amazing characters so, if you speak to them long enough, they always have funny stories. Colin Edwards, for instance, once managed to bend the axle of his big Dodge Ram truck in Texas while having fun on a dirt course, apparently he took it a bit too far and hit a big bump... I guess you need to have fun sometimes.

People often use terms like "Formula 1 circus" but what about MotoGP - do you say "MotoGP circus"?

MotoGP is very much a family. Everybody from the teams, from the riders, from the organisers, to the hospitality people, to the engineers - everybody is one big family, big group; media as well. We share flights together, etc., so it's a big family, that's for sure.

How did you get the job in motorsport industry and what advice would you give to anyone who wants to get involved on the professional level?

Motorsport is incredibly difficult to get into, everybody wants a job in motorsport and, because of this, it's very competitive but never give up, keep pushing. It's difficult but things do change a lot every year: riders change every year and, when it happens, very often teams will change so there are always new opportunities coming up. We're talking about technical jobs, press jobs, etc.; the best thing to do is find somebody within the paddock who can help you in the beginning.

Does living in Great Britain help?

Living in Great Britain helps with Formula 1 because a lot of F1 activity is based in Motorsport Valley. MotoGP - not so much. Rizla Suzuki's based in the UK, some of the Ducati team's based in the UK but mostly it's Italian-, Spanish- or Japanese-based operations.

If you're desperate to get into MotoGP, look to Dorna because they have many staff: it's TV, media, organisation, events, etc., we're talking hundreds of possible jobs; it's a good place to start. Once people know you and see you face in the paddock, it's worth a lot.

MotoGP riders vs. Formula 1 drivers - who would you choose and why?

This is a tough one, very difficult to choose. Let me explain: my background is mostly in cars so when I was 19 I drove an old Arrows F1 car and in Malaysia three weeks ago I had a ride on the back of the Ducati MotoGP two-seater. I can tell you that both are just incredible. To be a MotoGP rider or a Formula 1 driver you have to be right at the top of your game; not just fit, not just good but unbelievable. I did one lap on the MotoGP bike and after this my arms were dead because with the breaking force you get it's so physical, while these guys do 30 laps (come rain or shine) and they have to be SO fit.

Again with Formula 1 drivers, you can see they're incredibly fit, just look at their necks! The similarity between the two categories is that, if you try and ride a MotoGP bike or drive a Formula car at 50%, it's hopeless. That's where you need to take the fear out of your head and put it to the side to get to the 100% level these guys are at. I think it's more than anybody really realises. It's about the bravery and the skill to break that hard, to carry that much corner speed, to accelerate that early. This is where these guys get paid for what they do.

Formula 1 is often called "the pinnacle of motorsport" but how would you describe MotoGP?

MotoGP is top level of Grand Prix motorcycle racing. This is where the best motorcycle racers in the world end up so it is Formula 1 but on two wheels.

You see the general mood in the paddock: it follows the logic of Formula 1; we got corporate sponsors here. You can argue that Formula 1 is a bigger brand than MotoGP, it's more easily recognisable but MotoGP is F1 on two wheels, no doubt about it.

Can lady racers ever break into Formula 1 or MotoGP?

Yes, I think there's no reason why not. It's probably more common in the States with Danica Patrick for example, but in Europe you have Susie Stoddart and Katherine Legge racing in the DTM, etc., even in the past we've had female drivers in F1. I suppose you could argue that motorcycle racing is more male-dominated, more physical. In fact, within the paddock here there are no female riders, but if you look at the national championships - there are. The difference is, if you have one female racer compared to two hundred male racers or competing for two spots in MotoGP, the odds are that two of the two hundred guys will make it than one female. But it's possible, there's big value in having lady racers in motorsport.

You do get a lot of women working in the industry but it's off the circuit: media, team, hospitality and even engineers. Bridgestone also has a number of women working in its Formula 1 programme: Tina Vajanszki (tyre technician), Anna Playford (tyre engineer with Toro Rosso) and Monica Santucci (travel co-ordinator).

How would you rate MotoGP calendar vs. Formula 1 calendar as a paddock insider?

Well, MotoGP calendar started quite slowly this year but in the last seven weekends we've had five races so it's been a difficult and a tiring end to the season. This is an interesting point because it's common to think that for Formula 1 or MotoGP folk everything is perfect, you travel around the world, you see nice places and beautiful people, you go to races. Yes, it's true, this is fantastic and I would not change my job for a second but the one problem is airline travel: this year I've done more than 70,000 miles in the air on something like 30 flights. If you add up the time you spend sitting in airports, it's an awful lot.

Nobody in F1 paddock or MotoGP paddock will say, "Ah, I hate my job..." If they do, it's time for them to leave, but the one thing they will say is the difficult side of it is airline travel. Maybe it has something do with the fact that a lot of staff fly economy, it's not business class everywhere as people might believe. For the teams, for the crew, for media - it's economy class which can be fairly demanding. The flight from back from Australia was 40 hours in total with some changes and stops.

Any calendar is difficult but you know about the calendar when you start on the job so you can't complain.

In Formula 1 FOM usually provides some free plane tickets for the teams - is it the same in MotoGP with Dorna?

I'm not aware of it. Dorna will organise airplane freight for circuits from race to race, especially when there's a short turnaround (like from Aragón to Japan). There is financial support but no free plane tickets.

Do you have any favourite tracks and what's cool about them?

Malaysia is good fun, I like the circuit and the place has a nice relaxed feel to it. Aragón is a fantastic circuit, a great facility; strange place in the middle of nowhere. You look from the circuit and there's just this desert land behind you. Mugello is beautiful, another fantastic track. It's really busy with Italian fans.

FORMULA FORD... TRANSIT

October 2010

I'm a fan of raw and brutal racing just as I'm a fan of alternative and underground music. Last month I made a shocking discovery which changed my life for good:

Ford Transit Trophy. Yep, you got it right - big pimped-up vans racing on circuits around the Iberian Peninsula.

The competition is based in Portugal and races mainly at Portuguese venues like Estoril or Portimão (during Le Mans Series weekend) but a visit to the notorious Nürburgring's Nordschleife is planned later this year. You can't help but think about Top Gear's experiment with a similar van a few years back, is that where the inspiration for this amazing trophy came from?

Anyway, Ford Transit Trophy is designed as a user-friendly competition, both for the participants and us fans. Specially modified Transit vans are powered by 200 bhp diesel engine and trophy organizers are pushing for the use of bio-diesel fuel in 2011. Apparently, you can have one for about €30,000 - how cool is that? There is Transit paddock village at each circuit which has various historic and recent Ford racing cars on display - marvellous. I can confirm that the smell coming out of the hospitality area was just fantastic, maybe I'll be able to appreciate the majestic food they got there in Portimão next month.

You may think it's impossible to have close racing with these massive machines, but you'd be amazed at the action-packed events they manage to put out. The amount of shenanigans and pushing & shoving is unbelievable. Fans in the grandstands were ecstatic.

This one comes highly recommended. If you can catch a Ford Transit Trophy race next year, I'm sure you'll be converted just like me - a smash motorsport hit.

FÓRMULA FORD... TRANSIT

Outubro 2010

Descobri o Troféu Ford Transit por acaso: estava a estudar o programa de Le Mans Series em Portimão este ano e deparei-me com o anúncio de duas corridas Transit Racing. Na altura pareceu bastante surrealista e por acaso pensei logo em carrinhas Ford Transit dos anos 90, não sei donde veio essa ideia, talvez do distribuidor do pão que acorda os habitantes da nossa aldeia com o "uivar" da sua Transit velha às 5 da manhã...

Após um momento de bloqueio total (podemos chamar-lhe "momentary lapse of reason & total eclipse of the heart"), cheguei com a ajuda do google ao excelente site da competição e já estava a preparar a minha viagem ao Estoril no início de Outubro para ver o Troféu "in the flesh".

Não sou um fotógrafo profissional mas a necessidade de saber tirar umas fotos mais ou menos perceptíveis surgiu na sequência do trabalho que tenho feito para o site oficial de fãs da equipa Renault da Fórmula 1. Várias vezes por ano tenho que me deslocar à vizinha Espanha e sempre trago umas histórias (contadas do ponto de vista de um fã) e centenas ou às vezes milhares de fotos porque tento "aproveitar". A fotografia é um meio de comunicação bastante poderoso que

completa os meus artigos.

Na semana antes da corrida no Estoril estava a ficar obcecado com as imagens das carrinhas e sabia que ia divertir-me a sério. O divertimento começou logo de manhã com chuva torrencial e vários acidentes perto de Sintra... Isso também significava que só poderia ficar debaixo da cobertura da bancada A porque não tinha equipamento próprio para filmar à chuva e ter as gotas de água a tapar as lentes da câmara não era uma opção. Não me importo de ficar molhado pela causa (desporto automóvel) mas afogar a máquina fotográfica que sofreu bastante com os testes da F1 em Jerez de la Frontera em Fevereiro pareceu errado. A minha velha Fuji tem sido boa companheira desde 2006 e estou emocionalmente ligado a ela.

A corrida cheia de acção não desapontou, pena foi ter durado pouco tempo. As carrinhas tinham uma presença fantástica na pista lendária do Estoril e, a julgar pela reacção positiva dos fãs que estavam a esconder-se da chuva e vento como os pássaros no topo da bancada, dava para perceber que nasceu uma competição de culto.

Depois ainda tive a oportunidade de apreciar as carrinhas mais de perto no paddock no "parc fermé" já que o público podia circular livremente pelo circuito. Como dizia Lou Reed, "just a perfect day" no autódromo.

Ford Transit Trophy Rocks my World!

GT RACING

September 2010

I've been quite a fan of the Spanish GT Championship - "Campeonato de España Iber GT" if you prefer the original title - for a long time. You can't resist the magic of Ferrari, Porsche, Lamborghini, Audi or Aston Martin all of whom were backed up by multiple funky Ginettas and classic BMW M3 GT4 cars this year. "Even in the summer, even in the spring/You never get too much of a wonderful thing", as PJ Harvey used to say.

Perhaps I should explain myself: Spanish GT inferno comes to my backyard (Estoril circuit near Lisbon) every year. In the past it used to be supported by the European F3 Open but not this time unfortunately - in return we still got pretty eventful Mini Challenge and Peugeot 207 THP Cup races. It all fits nicely into my "bread and circuses" philosophy of life. I must also mention that paddock tickets were on sale for €10 on this occasion. It was a great initiative by the organizers because you could get really close to the amazing beasts and drivers.

One of the stars of Iber GT in 2010 has been (the original Virgin Racing's test driver) Alvaro Parente who recently paid a visit to the GP2 podium in Spa. Alvaro is a former World Series by Renault champion but he's suffering from serious lack of

funding which prevented him from breaking into F1. He tested the R27 a couple of years ago as his reward for winning WSR title and got a very positive response from the-then head of test engineering Christian Silk. Money makes the world go round... Who knows how many potential Fangios never got the chance to thrill us with their performances in F1?

Formula 1 folk may scoff at GT racing but for many current drivers it's their future that's already forming. Besides, these cars are capable of achieving close to 270km/h and make formidable noises aided by fantastic presence on the track. It's very basic and grass roots racing a bit like the WRC (is it why Raikkonen likes it there so much?).

I've been saying it for many years but I'll repeat myself once again: Formula 1 must look into value-for-money aspect of its show. Ticket prices in F1 are disproportionate and it's always possible to do more with less money.

One last thought: my obsession with getting close to action and taking as many photos as possible once again manifested itself in the form of my totally burnt face and red ears. Now I really understand why F1 photographers wear funny panama hats and monstrous caps on many occasions. I must urgently get one myself!

Q&A with Virgin Racing's Technology Partner CSC

August 2010

Q: How long does it usually take you to get all the systems up and running at each track? Any interesting or unusual challenges that have arisen so far?

CSC: We usually arrive at the track on Tuesday morning and have the main structure of the garage up as well as the network and garage IT systems running by the end of the day. It then typically takes Wednesday to set up the pit wall systems and link them to the network and finally check all the IT system, radio links and TV feeds. That leaves Thursday to do the extra jobs like setting up new screen or pit stop cameras or sorting out general technology niggles.

The older or temporary tracks like Monaco and Melbourne make things more difficult to set up the technology as space is often very tight and it can be a struggle to lay cables for the network. The hot and/or humid races are also a problem from an IT perspective as it's difficult to keep the kit at a suitable temperature. It's quite strange putting a block of dry ice in a server cabinet!

Q: What advice would you give to someone who dreams of working in Formula 1 and particularly in the IT department?

CSC: The critical thing first of all is to get the right IT experience, probably in a broad based environment such as an IT services company like CSC. This will provide you with the core skills that an F1 team needs to develop and deliver the IT in this fast and competitive environment.

Even in the tough times over the last 18 months, CSC have taken on 100's of new employees, including schemes for young people such as a graduate programme, an industrial placement scheme, an apprentice scheme and a technical trainee scheme.

The IT experts working as part of Virgin Racing are taken straight from the client facing teams at CSC, but as you can imagine there are quite a few applicants. Good luck.

Q: You've been in F1 for more than 6 months now - are you enjoying the ride?

CSC: Yes. It's hard work with some very long days and times when the pressure is really intense, but it's a fantastic experience and great to be part of the team and the whole F1 show.

Q: What was the happiest day for the team this year?

CSC: The team is making good progress in its first season so there are new highs all the time. The first two car finish for the team in Spain was certainly the first major milestone of the season but the way the team has brought significant development steps to the car in recent races has also been very rewarding to see.

Q: Why do you think so many Formula 1 teams are based in the UK? What makes Britain so special?

CSC: There are a number of reasons, but much of it is due to the motorsport ecosystem that has built up in the UK that becomes self sustaining. It is about the large specialist supplier base, and the fine balance of supply and demand in jobs and training that delivers skilled and experienced engineers, aerodynamicists and key technical people. Just as southern Germany has Porsche, Mercedes-Benz, BMW and Audi located within a two hour drive and Italy has traditionally had great engine builders around Modena with Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati and Ducati to name a few, so the UK has developed as an F1 centre of excellence.

Q: F1 trades on its glamorous image and many fans think of it as an essential part of the show - can you estimate the actual levels of glamour in F1? How are things in reality?

CSC: Without doubt F1 attracts the rich, famous and sometimes beautiful. The paddock and the grid are definitely places to see and be seen and it's an integral part of the show for a lot of fans. People watching can even be quite fun for those of us that are there week in week out. But it's not all glamour particularly when you are trying to run network cables through drains and over gantries in the rain in Barcelona or across a toilet block in China.

Q: You mentioned something about "a cable called the umbilical which plugs into a socket in the car which allows" the engine laptop to talk to the VR-01 - so how do you fire up the engine with a laptop/Jump Battery? Can you make the Cosworth CA2010 sing with your laptop?

CSC: The umbilical is basically a network cable that hangs down from the over-car gantry in the garage. It means that the car becomes a node on the network which means all the on-board systems are then linked to the garage systems. While telemetry data is sent from the car while it is on the track, much more is collected and downloaded through the umbilical when it's back in the garage.

The umbilical cable provides the car with power and a network connection to the car IT systems. Each car has chassis and engine management IT systems, monitored by separate laptops. These are used prior to starting the car to ensure everything on the car is set up correctly: hydraulic pressures, gear in neutral, throttle/engine/diff maps configured along with a whole host of other parameters that are checked before it is safe to fire up. The car is started with an external starter motor once the engineers give the OK to the mechanic. Whilst it is possible to start the car up without a laptop, we would never attempt to until we are sure everything is in order so that it won't cause any damage.

The engine laptop can control the engine throttle, so in a sense they are on speaking terms, although we haven't programmed it to sing.

Q: In one of your winter testing reports you talked about HD Pit Cam used to record and review pit stops - do you use that piece of equipment on the race weekends?

CSC: As pit stops can be so critical in a tight race, we need to take every opportunity to monitor our performance and look for areas of improvement. As a new team we are learning all the time, so this is just one more opportunity to get better. As you can read in our blog from SILVERSTONE, we used the HD pit cam for the first time during a race weekend. We had a few issues so by the time you read this we will have tried a different approach from Hockenheim onwards.

Q: What are your duties at the factory in Dinnington and, apart from looking after the IT department, what other roles did you have since arriving in F1?

CSC: The new F1 factory was only recently opened, so CSC has provided a complete IT infrastructure from the ground up. This ranges from PC's and laptops to data centre infrastructure including file storage and firewalls to communications including the telephony system as well as internet access and email for everyone. We also make sure that everyone has access to the core applications, such as the accounting system, that they need to do their jobs. The development work for the factory infrastructure is on-going and occupies our time when we are not focussed on the track side IT.

When we are at the track, while the priority for us is the IT, we are expected to turn our hands to whatever needs to be done including helping with setting up the garage, packing up the trucks after the race and even cleaning wheels. As an extreme example of this, Joe Birkett, the Virgin Racing IT manager, also serves as one of the pit stop crew.

Q: Virgin Racing is known for taking different approaches so how can CSC (with its 50 years of experience in the IT field) innovate in F1 and do things differently? Is it possible or did you have to adapt your way of doing things to the demands of the sport?

CSC: The primary focus of innovation at Virgin Racing has been with the fully digitally engineered car that has been developed using CFD analysis rather than wind tunnel testing.

In terms of trackside IT the emphasis is on reliability and durability rather than out and out innovation. This is an area, like many others, where as a new team it's important to get the basics right and to learn to walk before we run. We have therefore focussed on standard, proven hardware and software solutions with extra elements like SSD drives on all laptops

to reduce the risk of failures.

In the first season it was important to get the foundations right, but there are plenty more innovations in the pipeline from Virgin Racing and CSC that we will tell you about as they roll out.

Q: In Jerez de la Frontera in February you had a small box with a laptop as the only piece of equipment on your pit wall with an interesting writing saying: "Don't sit on this box - laptop inside!" Now you have a pretty elaborate pit wall - any interesting facts about pit wall systems and how long does it take to set it up?

CSC: The pit wall system consists of an equipment rack and two pods where the team managers sit. There are multiple screens displaying TV feeds, car position on track and weather as well as laptops linking to the track side IT systems. They also house the radio communication systems. It doesn't take long to set up, so we tend to do it once the main garage infrastructure is up and working. Pretty much everything is pre-wired, so the main units just need connecting together and linked to the garage IT system – usually be fibre. Being exposed to the elements has caused problems especially if it has been very hot. The equipment rack is protected by an insulating blanket that protects it from most the elements such as sun and rain. Keeping it dry is obviously essential but it's also important to reflect as much of the sun's heat as possible to keep temperatures at a manageable levels.

Q: Supposedly both Virgin Racing cars can generate "around one terabyte of data over a race weekend" so how do you store all that data and make sure you can access it from every circuit on the F1 calendar?

CSC: We currently collect around 100Gbytes of data over a race weekend, although we could increase this significantly. Teams with larger infrastructures do capture considerably more. This includes telemetry data, video and standard data files and it's easily held on a standard RAID data storage array, which provides an extra level of protection.

Telemetry information is available from previous races at the track side, although it's mainly used for running simulations prior to a race weekend where effectively the whole race can be replayed and the car/driver's responses can be analysed.

As one of the new teams we obviously don't have any data from last year's races, but as we move into our second season it will be useful to use data from the previous year to help prepare for races in simulations and at the track.

We have a network link back to the factory from the track which is used to upload data for long term storage and reference.

Q: One of the striking features of the F1 paddock are the custom built mobile data centres that you see at the rear of the garages and the tall communication masts. In case of Virgin Racing - are they used to send data back to the factory in the UK? How do you transport these masts?

CSC: The big masts are actually for the telemetry transmission as the car goes around the track. The reason they are so tall is to get coverage for as much of the track as possible. Every track has blind spots where we can't "see" the car, but the aim is to minimise these. The masts are telescopic so when they come down they take up much less space and can

be carried in the trucks. Unlike the big teams that have strategy people at the factory online and live during a race weekend, we currently handle the analysis at the track although there is an upload data link back to the factory as well.

A POOR MAN'S MONACO

August 2010

I was born poor; I live in a tiny apartment and I own a small city car, hence Valencia - "a poor man's Monaco" - suited me perfectly. I had to choose between Barcelona and Valencia this year and chose the latter for the same reason - it was cheaper to get there and stay there. The biggest advantage for a mighty pauper like me was that you could get to the circuit by using public transport so I wouldn't have to worry about rental cars and boring stuff like that. I also hate driving around new places - you always get it wrong even with a little help from GPS navigator. I was quite pleased to find out that Valencia Metro could take me anywhere in the city - from the airport to my monstrous hotel downtown and then to the track.

Valencia Street Circuit (don't confuse it with the permanent Circuit de la Comunitat Valenciana Ricardo Tormo) came to life courtesy of Fernando Alonso's massive popularity in Spain plus some quick thinking from the local government and you can't blame them for that - when "opportunity knocks" you gotta seize it. It's great for the tourism industry and I'd probably say that tourism in some way overshadows F1 racing. Valencia's a great destination to spend your summer holiday but the track layout leaves a lot to be desired, even though it's pretty wide in some places as I was able to confirm during Thursday's pit walk when we were allowed to walk some parts of the track too.

My guess is that they recruited the wrong guy to design it - Tilke is all about twists and turns but he only slows the cars down. It's "Tilke Train". They should've gone for something in the Norisring style (it's a street track used by DTM), wild, simple, raw and brutal. To give Valencia some credit, we did see a good number of overtaking moves in 2010, courtesy of the chaotic race and Kamui Kobayashi's fresh tyres during the last few laps. I suppose Singapore (a similar circuit) is suffering from the same problem and we're yet to witness a truly interesting Grand Prix there too. At least both these races tend to be sold out which is a good sign.

I can't complain about the general organization of the event, although a couple of over-zealous security guards tried to stop me from taking pictures of the surrounding area. Weird. I didn't have a beard...

Open Doors initiative on Thursday was great and the fans were allowed into the pit lane to see the cars up close and get some autographs from the drivers.

Ticket prices were ridiculous as always in modern F1. I mean this is poor man's Monaco! I left almost two months wages in Valencia if you take into account the total cost of accommodation, plane tickets, race tickets and food. I can only imagine what 100% authentic Monaco would do to my pockets! I'd probably have to sell my

tiny apartment if I wanted to have a good time in Monte Carlo!

Poor people want bread and circuses and this is something F1 big wigs must understand.

Don't call my name, Bernardo...

ESTORIL

July 2010

Mein Gott! This is my first track feature and I'll start with one of the legendary F1 tracks of the past - the Estoril racing circuit in Portugal. It's situated not far from the country's capital Lisbon and between the historic town of Sintra (where Lord Byron used to chill out back in the day) and a seaside holiday resort of... Estoril (which is also famous for the largest casino in Europe, top-rate golf courses and Estoril Open tennis tournament). Strictly speaking, it's the Atlantic coast we're talking about so the place has its own very peculiar micro-climate with local Mistral starting to blow after 14.00 hours and blanketing the Sintra Mountains under a thick layer of fog. I remember hiding behind the TV commentary boxes in the main grandstand and being almost blown away by the gusts of strong wind in 2002 when the Spanish GT Championship was in the house (it's a noisy affair but one that produces a lot of on-track action every year).

The circuit itself was built around 1972 and hosted a number of Formula 2 races in the 1970s with Jacques Laffite winning in 1975, Rene Arnoux in '76 and Didier Pironi in '77. There was also a round of World Sportscar Championship held in 1977 with the late Vittorio Brambilla (fondly nicknamed "The Monza Gorilla") taking the honours.

The F1 circus visited the track for the first time in 1984 just in time for the championship decider between Niki Lauda and Alain Prost. Lauda finished second to Prost but managed to take his last World title in the process by half a point. I met a person who attended that race and he described it as "a lot of noise and confusion" - I think it does fit. F1's a show after all.

In 1985 Ayrton Senna in the Lotus-Renault won his first ever F1 race in Estoril under heavy rain - a classic. The space in front of the main grandstand is now called "Ayrton Senna Square", in memory of the legendary Brazilian driver.

Other well-known winners included Nigel Mansell, Gerhard Berger, Riccardo Patrese, Damon Hill, Michael Schumacher, and David Coulthard. The last Formula 1 winner in Estoril (in 1996) was Jacques Villeneuve who impressed with his overtaking manoeuvre on Schumacher.

After that the race dropped off the F1 calendar and the circuit was subjected to various upgrades. F1 teams used it for testing quite extensively in the early 2000s

with Prost and Arrows ominously turning up the heat to attract sponsorship money. The last major Formula 1 test took place in April 2002 prior to that year's Austrian Grand Prix. Anthony Davidson, Jacques Villeneuve and Olivier Panis were present for BAR-Honda, while the-then rising star from Australia Ryan Briscoe was on duty for Toyota.

The circuit attracted a number of international events during these years (World Series by Nissan/Renault, FIA Truck Racing Championship, DTM, WTCC, FIA ETCC, A1, Superleague Formula, V de V, Spanish GT and F3, etc.) and has been home to the Portuguese round of MotoGP since 2000. It was in Estoril that a young lad called Robert Kubica famously took the World Series by Renault title in 2005 which earned him a test with his present F1 team.

This year the programme has been somewhat reduced with MotoGP being the main act but there has been some development work going on in the area. Access to the circuit for private cars was improved and there are plans for a new world-class kart track.

It's pretty obvious that Estoril's chances to host anything F1-related are pretty slim but it's a whimsical little circuit where you can feel racing history seeping from the pores of the asphalt. They say that the spirit of Percy Lambert "regularly walks at Brooklands in full racing attire". If somebody's spirit is ever going haunt Estoril, it'll be mine, albeit in full Iberian gear.

F1: EUROPEAN GRAND PRIX IN VALENCIA

June 2010

This is the story of the track that I previously knew only from TV. I didn't like it at all and it made me feel blue; then I decided to check it out in real life and in reality it turned out far better than I thought it would be, which didn't prevent many TV viewers from dozing off.

I'll spare you the gory details of my flight from Lisbon to Valencia; I'll just confess that I fell asleep at the airport a couple of times and nearly lost my pants when they asked me to remove my belt at the security gate (that's what you call being "caught with one's pants down").

Anyway, after a bumpy ride we touched down at Valencia airport and I was instantly surrounded by F1 atmosphere: Alonso/Santander/Ferrari posters were everywhere; while somebody at the arrivals was waving a big sign saying "AT&T Williams" - apparently waiting for a guest or a member of the Williams team to come out. Valencia airport is small and cosy; it's quite user-friendly.

As I made my way to the exit, I discovered that at the lobby some crazy Russian tourist was swearing in both Spanish and Russian: he needed an explanation from a frightened Spanish lady who worked for Iberia. The Russian guy was going totally

nuts, screaming how he would chop into little pieces the "chico" who sold him the tickets and demanding satisfaction by repeatedly asking "donde está el chico". That nasty chico obviously didn't show up.

I exited the airport and spotted the entrance to the Valencia metro, which my mate Tony, who lives in the area, promised would take me to my monstrous hotel downtown (Expo Hotel Valencia). I worked out the itinerary and was soon checking into my hotel where Tony would be joining me soon. Outside I spotted a van belonging to Virgin Racing with F1 accreditation sticker on the windscreen - cool.

I was quite hungry by then so I thought it would be a good idea to pay tribute to the local cuisine in the form of Burger King. Since Pedro de la Rosa is the image of BK in Spain, I suppose I can treat its whoppers as traditional Spanish food. After consuming all the tasty plastic food I descended into the labyrinths of the metro but, nevertheless, found my way to the circuit. Neptú station was right outside our P5 grandstand - how cool is that? You don't even need a car in Valencia. I'm loving it!

The first thing I noticed was a bunch of security guards and local policemen surrounding the circuit and acting very much like they owned the place. At some point one hyperactive guard felt like telling me that I had no right to take pics. I wonder what's wrong with taking photos? I then decided to take it easy and shoot (sic) with more discretion, which worked out nicely.

The city of Valencia is quite picturesque; I loved the beach. Everyone was very helpful and I got all the information I wanted at the hotel - a bonus. Coffee was damn good too.

On Thursday we were met by RF1 PP (if you don't know what that is, then just google "renault f1 team") and given our paddock passes. It would be our first time in the Grand Prix paddock. We've been to Valencia and Jerez paddocks during winter testing but this was a whole different ballpark: the buzz was phenomenal. I mean we're the new kids on the F1 block so, quite understandably, we were wetting our pants from excitement.

We were then given additional garage passes and shown the Renault garage which was "dressed to impress". The amount of equipment they had there was just unbelievable; everything was "spick and span" (using Tarantino's language). The garage in full race trim reminded me of A Space Odyssey set or maybe Star Wars movies - very futuristic and unreal; it's divided into various separate sections. We saw two new gearboxes with endless tubes and cables attached to them - very impressive stuff. You've got a feeling that they could talk, a bit like that R2D2 droid: "Hallo, Iberian! What's up? Stop staring at me!!!" I was probably staring at those creations like an idiot...

Then we saw the IT area and we learned that there's in fact a live camera feed for the technicians to be able to see what the engineers and mechanics are doing to the cars in the front of the garage. Supposedly it's done to make sure that the IT guys don't have to leave their seats if there's some kind of urgent situation in the

garage. Instead they can see what's happening on a separate screen and chat with the mechanics on the team radio at the same time.

Next we checked out drivers' helmets, racing overalls and shoes. Kubica had two different helmet designs to try out: one had white stripes and the other one had no white at all, just the official 2010 Renault colours mixed with a bit of orange red. Helmets usually do a couple of races and then the drivers get new ones. The same for overalls - they get washed after every Grand Prix weekend and then at some point the driver receives new gear. Kubica's racing shoes were well used and he likes it that way because he can feel the pedals better.

Anyway, we had to leave soon because garage time is always limited and the teams prefer to have only their staff in that zone. They also give you special garage passes, if you're a guest. No visible garage pass will result in your immediate removal from the area - they have people for that.

On our way out we bumped into Eric Boullier (Renault team principal) who was very big and tall; Eric was talking on the phone looking very chic. He studied us closely but then he knew we were guests and RF1 PP was obviously showing us the way.

Then we were given a quick look around the new Renault motorhome where we spotted former F1 ace Jacques Laffite chatting with his friends at one of the tables in the guest area; there's also a second area which is only for the team members. The old motorhome is now left sitting at the team's base in Enstone, England. It's filled with legendary stories and, if I had the money, I'd buy it for myself as a piece of F1 history. RF1 PP kindly gave us a couple of bottles of water (because Valencia sun is so hot - it's likely to "nickfry" your brains unless you hydrate your body and mind) and sent us out into the brave new world of Valencia F1 paddock.

So our mammoth paddock walk has commenced: Timo Glock was the first F1 face to fall victim to Tony's aftershave. From that moment on Tony/driver gallery from the 2010 European Grand Prix only grew in proportions. We wanted to hunt them all down! I was busy working with my camera. All the drivers were nice and friendly and nobody refused a photo. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that we were proudly wearing VIP passes on our chests? I don't know.

We had another interesting chat with Andy Soucek - Virgin Racing's reserve and test driver - who was obviously looking forward to testing the VR-01 in Abu Dhabi and possibly in Jerez this winter. He was very friendly too but he already knew Tony so... Next we spotted Holly Samos (from BBC radio 5 live) and we just had to chat with her. She also agreed to a picture with T-man but her colleague (jokingly) demanded 50 quid from us. We managed to shake him off by saying that we were invited by Renault and all the bills should be sent to the team. Holly was friendly but probably shocked by our monstrous looks; we told her that we're big fans of her work with Renault because she's the voice behind the RF1 podcast.

The atmosphere in the paddock was really nice: you had various famous personalities hanging around. We saw Carlos Sainz speaking to Emilio Botin

(president of Santander); they were joined by Pedro de la Rosa. Jenson Button was walking around looking very calm and relaxed.

In the end we were really tired so it was time to return to the mothership - Renault motorhome - where we found Bradley Lord. Bradley's a total legend: he started the Renault team blog back in 2006 and used to work for F1 Racing magazine as Features Editor in 2008 and 2009. Now he's back with the team as head of communications and we were thrilled to meet him.

We each got a cup of coffee and mine was smaller because I asked for an espresso. Tony had a bigger cup - he opted for "café con leche" (coffee & milk) as the locals like to drink it. This was not fair as I'm the boss here!

We were happy to relax for about half an hour (during which Kubica fell victim to Tony/driver photo crusade) and after that it was time for a pit walk and that was also very entertaining. Pit walk was open to the general public as part of the "open doors" initiative. It was very fan-friendly and, understandably, huge crowds of fans had turned up. Needless to say, Spanish F1 drivers were in high demand with pure madness surrounding their respective garages: Pedro, Fernando and Jaime signed hundreds if not thousands of autographs.

For the rest of the weekend were confined to our cosy P5 grandstand and the huge TV screen in front of it but (with free tickets) we can't complain: seeing and hearing F1 cars go by is always mesmerizing.

To sum it all up: we were burnt by the Valencia sun having way too much fun.

FIA: RALLY RAIDS

June 2010

Last weekend marked my first foray into the world of cross country rallies or rally raids. I heard the cars were real monsters and I wasn't disappointed: they were more like tanks on wheels, colossal, mighty and cool.

I chose to appear at the opening ceremony for the Rally TT VODAFONE Estoril - Marrakech which took place in front of the largest casino in Europe with it's lovely gardens and sort of Côte d'Azur vibe. It turned out that this event was part of the FIA World Cup for Cross Country Rallies. FIA flags were all over the place and the only thing missing was Jean Todt.

Anyway, I managed to chat with Leonid Novitskiy from Russia who is the current leader of the aforementioned World Cup. Like all Russians he was a man of very few words. I think he's leading the rally as I'm writing this note so I guess he likes his performances to speak for himself.

The atmosphere was great and I obviously enjoyed it. Besides, I'm a motor racing

enthusiast so to me it's all about walking the walk rather than talking the talk. I don't think watching videos on YouTube or hunting for all the latest internet gadgets can improve my understanding of how things work in the world of motorsport so whenever there's a chance to increase my carbon footprint by travelling to various events - I take it!

Finally I have a confession to make: after the ceremony was over I went to the casino in a desperate attempt to gain some much-needed cash for my Wombat but... I lost everything. I had to walk home (that would be 50 kms) because I lost my car too! Oh, Iberian-mobile! Who's driving you now? Some greedy casino executive? Maybe I should concentrate on Formula 1 because there are no casinos at F1 circuits (I'll try to stay away from Monaco).

WRC: PORTO ROADSHOW

May 2010

Here at the Iberian HQ we've been keeping an eye on Kimi Raikkonen's adventures in the WRC this year so when we heard about Kimi and Co.'s visit to the city of Porto in the North of Portugal we seized this opportunity, optimized Iberian-mobile's set-up to maximize its speed, pushed the envelope and headed for Porto.

I can tell you that Porto region is a bit surreal, it's as if the place is still stuck in the 19th century: lot's of old abandoned colonial style buildings, lunar landscapes and industrial sites with weird names. It's also the port wine capital of the world ("Vinho do Porto" in Portuguese). Anyway, Porto's a charming and a very picturesque city but one I wouldn't want to live in! Yet in the past it staged such international events as Red Bull air race (which moves to Lisbon this year) and Rally Portugal right up until 2001 so this short visit to Porto on the part of today's WRC teams and drivers was more of a tribute to the city's great past. The main attraction for me, however, was obviously former F1 champion Kimi Raikkonen who was dumped in 2009 by Ferrari to make way for Fernando Alonso. Kimi's had a mixed season in the WRC so far and he's currently sitting in 10th place on 14 points.

As we were passing various small towns on our way to Porto, I was busy reading numerous graffiti. One in particular got stuck in my memory: "Fock off bitschs!" it said. No comment. To "fock" must be a verb I guess but apparently it doesn't exist in the English language.

Enough of syllogisms so let's get down to business: "billed as the Porto Roadshow and based around Porto's City Hall and Aliados Avenue (Avenida dos Aliados), the event was a joint initiative between the rally organisers and North One Sport, promoter of the WRC". First thing I noticed was the mighty WRC simulator available to everybody at just 4 euros. Unfortunately I didn't have much time because I wanted to check out Sébastien Loeb and Kimi Raikkonen who were supposed to be present at the Filinto Mota Citroen dealership (quite conveniently situated on the same avenue) for a a quick autograph signing session. Kimi was the first man

present on the scene and the fans went nuts at the sight of the Iceman. Lots of Finnish fans turned up, I don't know whether they were simply visiting Porto and happened to catch the Roadshow or whether they came on purpose to see Kimi. I was curious so I muscled my way past the overwhelming human mass and into the dealership where Kimster and his co-driver Kaj Lindstrom were in action. Posters, caps and t-shirts were being signed, thousands of pics taken but fortunately I was able to take a few photos myself. Not my best work but acceptable. You could see that Kimi has been training with his neck because it was absolutely monstrous (Loeb and Sordo were both very fit but nothing like Kimi). Maybe we'll see him back in F1 next year; I certainly hope so because F1's loss is WRC's gain. Session lasted for about 20 minutes and I was expecting Kimi to leave through the back door but instead he plunged into the crowd and kept signing autographs on his way to Citroen's hospitality area. That's dedication for you!

Gerard - my mate down under - remembers his encounter with Kimi back in 2002: A few years ago, I chased Raikkonen's car by foot out of the circuit and ran for about 250 metres (for an autograph). Then he slowed down, stopped and wound down the window... He said, "NICE running!" and I said, "Yeah, I've been training for this all year!" and they all p#ssed themselves laughing. Who wouldn't? That was a lovely story.

Next were Loeb and Sordo (who came straight from the airport with Seb speaking on the phone all the time and Dani consuming large quantities of Red Bull) and the real madness began. Spanish fans were present in numbers and probably up to 1,000 people of all ages queued up to catch a glimpse of their heroes! I was watching from the side of the improvised stage where Citroen boys were hard at work. They were willing to satisfy fans' need for autographs and "me/driver" photos. I was amazed really, WRC drivers were very fan-friendly and didn't try to avoid human contact. Cool stuff.

Afterwards I headed for the paddock area on the other side of the avenue, this meant that I had to use one of the back streets because it wasn't allowed to cross the track as one would expect. There was another surprise in store for me there: ladies of the night were taking advantage of the massive crowds and trying to seduce tourists. A representative of the oldest profession in the world spotted my big... camera and offered me to take part in a private photo shoot which I politely declined and explained that I had a roadshow to attend.

Both Ford and Citroen drivers could be seen in the paddock because it was situated very close to the spectators area. I took this opportunity to add up to my tally of pics. Then I strategically positioned myself near the start/finish zone quickly realizing that holding this spot is important otherwise I'd be pushed back by other eager motorsport maniacs. It was a hot day and cold beer was flowing while 40,000 people (50,000 according to Portuguese sources) witnessed a great show with racing cars jumping, doing doughnuts, getting as sideways as possible, and performing all sorts of crazy stunts right in the city centre. Drivers were loving it and spectators - even more! I then tried to get to the jumps area with artificial ramps but it just wasn't possible, you couldn't move around because the place was absolutely

crammed with people.

"I think events like this really help to promote the sport," said Ford's Mikko Hirvonen. Couldn't agree more. It's also worth noting that Red Bull Racing did a Formula One demonstration in the Dominican Republic last weekend so thankfully there are still people in F1 who understand the value of promotion but we need more events like that in cities around the world with various F1 teams present. They just need to forget about pleasing the sponsors and make some noise for the people.

F1 WINTER TESTING: WET ON ARRIVAL

February 2010

As you all may well know, Iberian HQ are in Lisbon (Portugal) which makes Jerez a perfect place to see F1 cars in action, have a bit of fun and enjoy warm sunny weather. But not this time!

It was raining cats and dogs when I left Lisbon and it kept on raining elephants and giraffes (here I'm paying homage to Salvador Dali and his "Burning Giraffe") during my 650km journey.

Jerez de la Frontera remained virtually unchanged since December 2009 when I was there for the young driver test: crazy traffic, insane drivers, parking tickets and dilapidated hotels downtown - all this was a real downer (paying homage to Nirvana here). I'll move on to the part that really matters.

On day 1 at 8 o'clock (Timo Glock!) (am) I was standing outside the main entrance waiting for my man (paying homage to the Velvet Underground this time) and my paddock pass. Needless to say Jerez circuit media centre couldn't grasp the concept of the Blue and Orange universe and refused our accreditation because they only understand the word 'journalist'. Does one have to be a journo to report from F1 events? I certainly don't think so. Brush up your English, circuito fellas!

Anyway, the pass finally arrived (THANK YOU MY MAN! F1 (registered trade mark) GOD BLESS YA!) and I was able to take the paddock by storm with my two cameras and whatever. It was raining baboons and gorillas and all the cars/drivers stayed in their respective garages which gave me some time to take the obligatory paddock atmosphere pics. It went well. The sun came out and with it the cars so I concentrated on taking more pics for you guys.

The action was good but not phenomenal like in the past when the teams were allowed to run two cars on the track, it was acceptable though. Lotus was the noisiest beast of all with Fauzy driving; Virgin appeared only a couple of times; Schu 'completed a planned long run on dry tyres in the early afternoon before a further downpour soaked the track' if you believe Mercedes press office; Vettel was rocking hard all day; Force India forced Paul di Resta into the car; Hammo spent

most of his day running between McLaren hospitality area and the garage plus putting mileage on the car; Massa stopped on the track and I was able to take a pic of his bald spot when he returned to the pits; Petrov was hanging out on the pit wall and got down to business only in the afternoon; Buemi was bueming, doing his thing without too much drama; Rubens had a few electrical problems and I was lucky to get a pic of the second bald spot in a row when he was given a ride to the pits; de la Rosa remained a bit of a grey mouse in his funky-looking Sauber C29-Ferrari very much to the disappointment of his enthusiastic fan club members in the grandstands who were screaming like crazy every 5 minutes asking Pedro to come out of the garage. Lap times didn't mean much so it made no sense to follow them unless you're a technical freak, it's not my case I can tell you.

In the afternoon I was supposed to have a little chat with Renault's Vitaly Petrov and I got what I wanted! I'd also like to say a BIG thank you to Renault F1 press office for this amazing opportunity (and strong delicious coffee). Vitaly had just spoken to a Russian TV crew who flew in from Moscow to see how the first Russian driver in Formula 1 is doing when I arrived on the scene (i.e. motorhome). He mistook me for a journo but I explained who I was and what the Blue and Orange world is. He seemed pretty enthusiastic about F1 fans getting more access to the paddock and told me that his new website should be launched soon. He was happy with the car but slightly disappointed with the Spanish weather as he wanted to do more laps to acclimatise himself with the R30 and all the procedures. Vitaly has attitudes very similar to the departed Kimi-Matias Räikkönen, well, not in the way he talks or acts but because he wants his on-track performances to do the talking for him. He's the kind of guy that wants to jump into the car and drive his a** off. Anyway, Vitaly didn't have much time so he congratulated us on our experiments and said he was hoping to see the Blue and Orange Lion clan members at more F1 events in the future. I was later able to spend some time in the Renault garage and get close to the R30. I witnessed the meticulous attention to detail; one has to admit that official photography or TV images don't do these cars justice. All the mechanics were working hard performing their tasks while Vitaly was sitting in the cockpit speaking to his engineer. He was then off for a series of laps. I was off to the top of the garages because I wanted to take more pics of the cars, no photos (or unauthorised filming without official FORMULA ONE ADMINISTRATION LTD CAMERA PERMIT) in the pit lane folks. It's only for the accredited media but since I was above the pit lane I could resume my favourite activity.

The testing came to an end at 5 o'clock (with Timo Glock firmly in the VR garage) and I decided to take an afternoon walk around paddock. I bumped into Massa but didn't disturb him with any requests as he was going to have a de-brief on the day with Rob Smedley who was waiting for him. Massa was about to dive into Ferrari motorhome/space for engineers when a female photographer screamed something to him in Italian so he stopped and posed for her with a huge smile on his face. Obviously I used the opportunity to take a pic too. You live and you learn (I must learn Italian I guess). Schumi was invisible, I didn't even catch a glimpse of him. The man's a pro, you can tell, he knows how to avoid the press because his motorhome was parked right outside Mercedes garage.

The next day was spent mostly hiding from the rain and storm winds, the track action was also very limited. I couldn't stay for the final two days of testing which was a shame but anyway I'm hoping to invade the F1 paddock in Barcelona and Valencia. I've got no money to travel to the opening races of the season so Europe remains our best opportunity to get close to the fantastic sport of Formula One (registered trade mark) racing. Cheers Martin!