

Preview

2004 Chinese Grand Prix

Round 16 of 18

by Alex "Zander" Keep



View from the Cockpit

I will be taking the course during the 2004 season using EA's *F1 Challenge '99-'02* and Ralph Hummerich's excellent *RH 2004 Season* carset that's available from [this link](#).

Shanghai International

Shanghai International Circuit is truly a motorsport venue for the 21st century. Like Sepang and Bahrain, this is another Hermann Tilke project, and China's first Formula 1 venue is designed to impress the visiting world.



The track has two massive straights, and this, coupled with its impressive width, means there is no excuse for a lack of wheel-to-wheel action from the Grand Prix cars. There are also two "snail-shaped" corners, which turn through more degrees (around 270) than anything seen before at this level of the sport.

The venue is built on a "soft soil foundation," and its enormous structures are a serious architectural achievement. It's a straightforward drive from the city to the racetrack, which lies on the outskirts of the metropolis.

Having a grand prix in China is a dream come true for Bernie and Max. The same can be said for China, which has spent over nine years trying to get on the F1 calendar. Like the new Bahrain circuit, the track in Shanghai has been built from scratch. It's not been an easy ride though. Designer Hermann Tilke was faced with a site that was a 300m-deep swamp and very flat. The load on the soil would be too heavy to take so the entire track foundation is made out of polystyrene and built on 40,000 piles of 40m to 80m deep. Like many of Tilke's designs, the German tries to incorporate features and symbolism of the country — in this case the track itself is shaped like the sign of 'Shang', which means

'rising'. Fans will be pleased to hear the track has several overtaking opportunities, that's the view of Jenson Button, who has visited the track under construction. The only doubt among some is the infrastructure in and around Shanghai and the culture shock to the teams of the country itself. The business it will generate though is sure to outweigh any difficulties.

Formula One races into Shanghai for the first time this week and drivers and teams alike are relishing the challenge of a country rapidly establishing itself as a sought after sporting venue. For world champion Michael Schumacher, it is a maiden visit to China and he plans to make the most of the opportunity.

"Certainly I'm looking forward to it," he said. "I think we all are — to experience a new country too."

For China, it is the latest step in its quest to bring top sports events to its shores, having already secured high-profile golf, tennis and football tournaments as well as the cherry on the cake, the Olympics in 2008. With a first-ever motorcycle Grand Prix scheduled for May next year in Shanghai and the World Amateur Boxing Championships in Beijing, China is becoming the new sporting hotspot.

Shanghai won a seven-year contract to host Formula One in 2002 and has thrown buckets of money into cementing it as a permanent fixture in a country seen as a vast untapped market for the sport's wealthy sponsors. The cost of transforming a swampy wasteland on the western outskirts of the eastern metropolis into a state-of-the-art race track has amounted to some 300 million dollars.

Organisers are confident that they've got it right and the race next Sunday will prove a huge success, despite Schumacher having already secured the world title and Ferrari's dominance, winning 13 Grand Prix so far this year.

"The inaugural Chinese Grand Prix will be a very exciting, safe and accomplished gala for motor sport fans," said the circuit's General Manager Mao Xiaohan. "I'm sure the trip to Shanghai will be unforgettable and exciting."

It isn't just the infrastructure that's had to be put in place. China has had to train 900 volunteer marshals for the event. With no previous experience, they have been drilled on how to deal with a crash, fire-fighting and even racing terminology.

Designed by renowned German Hermann Tilke, the circuit, loosely mirroring the Chinese character "shang", can hold 200,000 spectators, including more than 29,000 in the grandstand opposite the pits.

BAR-Honda driver Jenson Button, who tested a car here earlier this year, described the infrastructure as 'staggering' and said the track would be 'physically challenging.' "It should be a good race. It looks like overtaking should be possible," he said.

The track features five punishing left hand corners and five right and a massive straight spanning 1,175-metres linking turns 13 and 14. "It was designed with overtaking in mind," Tilke told Chinese media. "And we've included slow corners as well as fast corners, which will make it much more difficult for the teams to decide on a strategy."

Drivers are expected to push their cars to 320 kph during 56 laps of the 5.45 kilometre track. Ferrari supremo Jean Todt described Shanghai's achievement as 'unbelievable'.

Although China has no car racing tradition to speak of and ticket prices amount to a month's wages for an average person, the event has sparked huge interest and organisers expect a full house.

Spectators can look forward to the return to racing of Ralf Schumacher who has been out since fracturing two vertebrae when he crashed his Williams in the United States Grand Prix on June 20.

"No one knows the Shanghai circuit which makes this race very exciting," said Schumacher.

There will also be a new face at Renault after the French outfit parted company with Italian driver Jarno Trulli. Canada's 1997 world champion Jacques Villeneuve is taking his place. Renault are fighting it out with BAR for second best this year, with just three points separating the two teams.

China was close to securing a Formula one race in the 1990s, spending nine years developing a track in the southern city of Zhuhai only for it to be dropped after allegedly failing to meet international standards.

Race Name: Chinese Grand Prix

Circuit Name: Shanghai International Circuit

Circuit Length: 3.387 miles

Race Length: 189.616miles/303.3860km (56 Laps)

Lap Record: N/A



Strategy

A two stop strategy seems to be the sensible one to go for around here. The pitlane seems quite long but the circuit will probably be more wearing on tires than many due to its Tilke-esque design and long lap. Being the first race a few teams are sure to go for one or three stops but two again seems the sensible option.



Standings

This page will be updated in each race preview with the latest driver and constructor results.

2004 F1 Driver's Championship Standings (through 15 of 18 races)

Position	Driver	Points
1	M. Schumacher	136
2	R. Barrichello	98
3	J. Button	71
4	J. Truilli	46
5	F. Alonso	45
6	J. Montoya	42
7	K. Raikkonen	28
8	D. Coulthard	24
9	T. Sato	23

10	G. Fisichella	19
11	R. Schumacher	12
12	F. Massa	10
13	M. Webber	7
14	O. Panis	6
15	A. Pizzonia	6
16	C. da Matta	3
17	N. Heidfeld	3
18	C. Klien	3
19	T. Glock	2
20	Z. Baumgartner	1

2004 F1 Constructor's Championship Standings

(through 15 of 18 races)

Position	Team	Points
1	Ferrari	234
2	BAR	94
3	Renault	91
4	Williams	60
5	McLaren	52
6	Sauber	29
7	Jaguar	10
8	Toyota	9
9	Jordan	5
10	Minardi	1

The Teams

This section will be updated in each race preview with the latest news and tidbits regarding the 2004 F1 Teams and their drivers.

Marlboro Ferrari *(Red with Marlboro graphics)*

As often seems to be the case these days, the upsets and scandals of the past fortnight seem to have utterly blown by Ferrari as the team continue on their tranquil way to another redwash this season. In Italy Barrichello's wrong tire choice and Schumacher's spin to the back of the field mattered little as the Scuderia wound up with another 1-2 finish ahead of a slightly dazed looking Jenson Button. On the political side there is no doubt that Ferrari will kick up again once the season is over. Although the team is the best funded in Formula 1, parent company Fiat is not willing to continue pouring money into the team as the management believe that their success entitles them to more money than any other team. The relative shares of revenue generated by coverage of F1 is governed by the Concorde Agreement and Ferrari are stuck with this until 2007 at the earliest. Even so the team know that they will need greater income in the long run. For now more money, better operational structures and, quite frankly, a better car than anyone else puts the result of Sunday's race in little doubt. Quite which Ferrari will finish ahead is the only real talking point regarding the race itself. No wonder the sport is in so much trouble!

M. Schumacher

Completely relaxed now that the championship is in the bag Schumacher sounds more the intrigued tourist than the hardened competitor when describing his feelings regarding the new Shanghai circuit. Schumi is certainly happy to just race and, as he has said numerous times himself, he is not after the statistics but instead is just happy to race. Other than the record for the most races completed Schumi's only other record he can attain is that of the most pole positions. Expect that to fall early in 2005! For this weekend Schumi would love to be able to say that he has again won on every circuit that the grand prix circus visits and this is sure to be his major motivation for the race. Bad luck seems more likely to stop another Schumi walkover as the other 19 drivers are unable to!

Barrichello

It was nip and tuck as to who had the most impressive Italian Grand Prix. Although Schumi spun to the back of the field and then put in one of the most impressive recovery drives of recent times, Rubens managed to choose completely the wrong tires, stay on them too long and rejoin from his pitstop in an unfamiliar car just ahead of Schumacher yet still managed to win the race! For the first time this season Rubens actually looked as fast as his team leader and it seems likely that we can expect a growing increase in both confidence and in raw pace from Rubens in the last few races of the year. This would nicely dovetail with Rubens' stated ambition of winning his home race at the final grand prix of the year in Interlagos. A decent performance can be expected and Rubens' performance on new tracks is often spectacular yet it seems unlikely that he will steal the honors this weekend.

BMW Williams F1 (*Dark Blue and White with Compaq and Allianz graphics*)

As if the continuing nightmare of Jenson Button on/off move to Williams were not bad enough chief designer Gavin Fisher has been badly injured in a motor biking accident in the States. Although Fisher is not in any danger and will make a full recovery Williams hardly need this at a time when their BMW engine is finally being caught by Ferrari and their Michelin tires are being made to look distinctly second rate by Ferrari and, especially, Sauber. Some glimmer of good news is that Ralf Schumacher will finally be making his return to the cockpit. There is no doubt that BMW will again be pushing forward in their engine development but this is sure to only detract from development from next year's powerplant which, unusually for BMW, has not been run in the back of a car yet. Even so it is clear that most of the team are more occupied on next year more than this and this may hurt results.

R. Schumacher

Probably the clearest indication that Williams are in need of help is the fact that Ralf Schumacher is returning to the cockpit at all! Williams could easily have done some sort of a deal with Jaguar to release outgoing driver Mark Webber from his contract and had him drive the last three races of the season (as has happened at Renault and possibly at Toyota and Jordan) yet the team have decided to allow Ralf to drive just before leaving the team to go to the well funded Toyota team! The FW26 is a very different beast from that Ralf last raced in America and, although Ralf ended up fastest at last week's test in Silverstone, it

seems unlikely that he will produce the same sort of comeback that his brother managed in Malaysia in 1999 (Pole, fastest lap by a second and a win).

Montoya

Having had people asking him if he still wants to move to McLaren all year it must have been pretty good for Juan Pablo to see the grey and black cars singing in the last few races. Montoya's head seemed to have dropped in recent races and reserve driver Antonio Pizzonia at times seemed to be matching the Colombian's times. As a result it is no surprise that he, like most of the Williams team, can not get out of there and into his new berth quick enough! That said Montoya knows that the battle between Williams and McLaren for fourth place in the constructor's championship is up for grab and it will be a matter of pride that they should not get it. A typically feisty drive can be expected in China.

West McLaren Mercedes (*Grey with West graphics*)

A promising race in Italy seemed to be hamstrung by minor niggles. There is no doubt that McLaren can build a fast car. They have done so more often than not over the last thirty years. What McLaren seem to fail to do (and have not done since the McLaren-Honda days nearly twenty years ago) is build a reliable car. The MP4/20 for next year looks like it is certainly promising in terms of raw speed and development potential, what seems less clear is whether the Mercedes Ilmor and the car's various electronics and hydraulic systems will manage to last the distance race in race out over the course of a season. So far this has been an unattainable goal for the team though it is a goal that must be attained if McLaren are to challenge the scarlet steamroller.

Coulthard

The first driver to be affected by Ford's announcement of their withdrawal from Formula 1. Coulthard was looking increasingly likely to be driving or Jaguar/Ford next season. The sale of the team not only puts this involvement in doubt but raises the specter of Coulthard's retirement from the sport. Coulthard's chances for next season seem to rest with BAR or Williams (depending upon the outcome of Wednesday's meeting of the Contract Review Board). The only other teams yet to finalize their seats for next season are Jaguar if it is bought and the two Ford powered minnows at the back so that, even if Coulthard could accept driving for a lesser team, it remains far from clear whether the teams in question will be on the grid next year.

Raikkonen

Kimi seems to have caught Schumi's tourist bug! Raikkonen approves of Hermann Tilke's design for the circuit and seems anxious to try it out. Kimi's win in Belgium seemed to set him back on his winning ways and he looked a real threat in Italy until his retirement. McLaren clearly have the raw pace and Raikkonen is thriving in the car which seems far more set up for him than or his outgoing team mate. With Montoya coming on board next season Kimi's last few races this season could well define how competitive he is relative to Juan Pablo and Raikkonen will therefore be trying his utmost to get some good results.

Mild Seven Renault (*Dark and Light Blue and Yellow with Mild Seven graphics*)

Jarno Trulli's relationship with Renault finally reached breaking point last week. Trulli's allegations of preferential treatment for his team mate coupled with a downturn in results and reliability have led to Trulli failing to record a decent result in the second half of this season. Flavio Briatore continued his reputation of giving his second drivers a hard time by sacking Trulli and installing 1997 Jacques Villeneuve in the car for the final few races. This plan cannot fail to work for Flav. The team were overtaken for second place in the constructor's championship in Italy. As a result Briatore had nothing to lose by getting rid of the disruptive Trulli (who was off to Toyota anyway) and installing Villeneuve. If Villeneuve does well Briatore will gain the plaudits before installing Fisichella for next season while if Villeneuve falls flat on his face then Briatore only has to put up with this for three races before he gets the vastly talented Fisichella on board!

Villeneuve

A return to a competitive cockpit for Villeneuve sets up the idea of some interesting battles in the remaining races this year. Bernie Ecclestone is widely known to have been behind the move and may even have bankrolled it to some degree. Villeneuve's times whilst testing the car were about a second a lap off Alonso's. This may seem like quite a bit but, considering this was mainly just work on systems and familiarization, Jacques has a lot to be proud of. Villeneuve should be around Alonso's pace when they arrive at Shanghai which sets up the intriguing situation of Villeneuve qualifying near Schumi and then taking the lead due to Renault's superior traction. Considering Villeneuve still feels he owes Schumacher following Schumi's deliberately driving into him in Jerez in 1997 Villeneuve is not expected to make life easy for the German. Only Villeneuve's Sauber contract (and the closeness between Sauber and Ferrari) may temper his actions.

Alonso

While changes seem to be abounding around him, Fernando Alonso is just carrying on his day job. Like Schumacher Alonso realises that continuity is the only way to really succeed and it is interesting to note that the main contenders for the title next year (Alonso, Barrichello, Schumacher and Raikkonen) have all been at their respective teams for at least two years. Moreover excellent drivers from this year such as Button and Montoya are not expected to perform as well next season purely because they are moving and are therefore seen as a disruptive influence. Alonso could do with a good result, however. Apart from briefly leading in Belgium after team mate Jarno Trulli pitted Fernando has not looked particularly strong this season and the young Spaniard is in danger of losing his "next Schumacher" tag if he is not careful. A good result ahead of his new team mate would do his standing in the team no end of good.

BAR Honda (*White with Red Lucky Strike roundels*)

The disruption of the last few weeks looked finally about to be resolved on Wednesday. The Contract Review Board, having rescheduled their meeting later and later have been given a rocket (courtesy of Mr B C Ecclestone who sent a fax suggesting that they were just three lawyers who could easily be replaced). As a direct result the Board is met on Wednesday and the results should have been made known before the race weekend. Unfortunately the CRB's meeting seemed to last all of 5 minutes. The Contract Review Board met and immediately agreed to adjourn the hearing until October 16th! Meanwhile Williams are said to be offering BAR £3 million to release Button from his contract should the CRB decide against Williams. For BAR holding on seems the only obvious answer. Button drove to a storming podium in Italy two weeks ago and the car is being continually upgraded in the race with Renault to be best of the rest.

Button

A fine podium in Italy did nothing to help extricate him from his current seat at BAR. Button is clearly bound to BAR for the rest of the year and there seems little doubt that this will mean until December 31st (most teams agree to allowing their drivers to drive for their new teams as soon as the season finishes). Furthermore with designer Geoff Willis in hospital and unable to work on the new car for the foreseeable future it is difficult to see how Williams can practically hope to start the season with a better car than the developed version of this year's highly effective BAR chassis.

Sato

Now formally re-signed for next year the relief on the part of Takuma Sato was clear at Monza. Sato's side by side duel with his team mate down to the Retofilia showed that Taku has lost none of his fighting spirit and can be relied upon to produce some of the most entertaining driving on the grid again next year. With the identity of his team mate still unknown Taku is getting on with things his own way and is determined not to let the team's other driver problems affect him. The Asian races are sure to promote Takuma in the spotlight and as a result he is hoping that a strong run of results may focus the team increasingly on him to the extent that the identity of his team mate may not be so important come packing up time in Brazil.

Sauber Petronas (*Mid Blue with a yellow airbox, white nose and front wing with Credit Suisse Red Bull and Petronas graphics*)

Peter Sauber's delight at being able to snap up Jacques Villeneuve as his driver for the next two years was plain to see. Sauber as a team have come on in leaps and bounds and the signing of Villeneuve represents the first former world champion to sign for the team. Sauber has signed race winners before, however. Johnny Herbert and Jean Alesi both signed for Sauber having won races and most recently Giancarlo Fisichella has been driving for Sauber after his win in Brazil. Talking of Fisichella Peter Sauber was offered a financial incentive to give Fisichella to Renault early but instead decided to hold off following Fisichella's run of points finishes recently.

Fisichella

With a Renault contract safe in his pocket and a strong run of points finishes behind him Giancarlo Fisichella is looking forward to the final races to continue his run of form and thereby further ensure Sauber's position in fifth in the constructor's championship. China should be an interesting circuit to see Fisi on as he often goes well on the Tilke designed tracks. With a return to the site of his maiden win in the final race on the calendar Fisi must be feeling pretty happy at the prospect of the remaining few races. It is understood that Fisi will be testing for Renault at the test in Barcelona at the beginning of November (the first one after the season ends) with Villeneuve making a similar swap in the other direction.

Massa

With Villeneuve and Massa confirmed for next year there seemed little point in testing drivers Gary Paffett and Anthony Davidson resulting in their tests being scrapped. More out of intrigue than anything else Peter Sauber still decided to test Vittorantonio Liuzzi with a view of possibly becoming the team's third driver next year. Liuzzi has won the final F3000 championship with a record number of wins and the reason for this was plain to see at the test. Liuzzi immediately lapped faster than Felipe and ended the test nearly a second faster. It seems highly unlikely that Sauber have now not got him firmly under contract for next season as a reserve driver though a race drive must be imminent for the talented young Italian. Felipe had better look over his shoulder!

Jaguar (*Green with HSBC graphics*)

Ford management delivered the biggest blow to Formula 1 in recent years by announcing the company's withdrawal from Formula 1 and the selling of Jaguar Racing and Cosworth Engineering. Ford had been planning to redefine their involvement in motorsports and it was widely thought that the manufacturer would be cutting their World Rally Championship team in order to rebrand Jaguar Ford F1. As it was Jaguar was decided to be sold. This decision is clearly seen as more political than sensible as the team are continuing work on next year's R6 with a chassis ready for testing and several major sponsors already signed up. Of course offering Jaguar up for sale has blown a hole through the potential sales of Jordan and Minardi as well as depriving them of their engines.

Webber

Easily the most popular and probably the most effective person to drive for the Leaping Cat Mark Webber has been highly supportive of the staff in Milton Keynes following Ford's decision to sell Jaguar Racing. Webber is determined to make a mark in Jaguar's final races and his loyalty and determination to do right by the team is touching to see. Whatever happens to Jaguar Webber has shown in the manner of his handling himself through this and his move to Williams that he is more of a bet for a championship than his possible new team mate for no other reason than team bosses know that Webber will work hard for them and not let them down.

Klien

One of the strangest stories to emerge regarding Jaguar is Ford's refusal to sell the team to Red Bull only a

few weeks ago. Christian Klein's sponsors were keen to set up an all American Racing Team to promote Formula 1 (and Red Bull) within the US. Unfortunately Ford strung them along for most of this season before finally telling them to get lost. Now Ford have pulled the plug on their F1 operations (only a few weeks after this) the logic of Ford's decision must be called into question. Red Bull may well be disinclined to again pursue purchasing Jaguar despite Ford's wish to sell it. That said negotiations are said to be ongoing between the parties once again so a buy out may still be on the cards. Whatever happens the possibility that the team as well as the Jaguar marque may be dismantled is very real at the moment.

Panasonic Toyota *(Red and White with Toyota and Panasonic logo graphics)*

Renault's sacking of Jarno Trulli led to a rushed press conference being announced last Thursday morning where Toyota announced one of the worst kept secrets in the paddock, namely that Jarno Trulli would be partnering Ralf Schumacher at the team next year. With a race winner in both cars as well as a race winner as test driver Toyota have established a prestige unmatched since McLaren in 1999 (ironically Olivier Panis was the test and reserve driver in both cases!). Trulli claimed that he was impressed by the TF104 yet his times showed that he was not confident in the car enough to race in China. Trulli is sure to be on hand should he be required and there is little doubt that we will see him in a Toyota before the end of the season.

Panis

One of his last races before he steps back into the reserve driver role, Olivier Panis is sure to be looking at the maelstrom of activity since he Ford pull out and giving himself a satisfied grin. Panis could possibly have landed a drive at Jaguar but, now that they are pulling out of the sport, it seems highly unlikely that Olive would have got a decent chance anywhere on the grid in the current climate. British stars David Coulthard, Anthony Davidson and Gary Paffett are all increasingly looking to be left out in the cold for next year and the fact that F3000 record holder Vittorantonio Liuzzi cant land a full time drive shows just how tight the current teams are for seats. Olivier must be a very happy man indeed.

Zonta

Zonta is more than a little lucky to still be in the car. Trulli's departure from Renault could and should have led to his racing with Panis for the final few races. Although Trulli was clearly not that happy with the car there could be other factors at work here. In order to hire Trulli Toyota management (who, unlike most, have to report to their board frequently) Toyota would have to have claimed that Panis, Zonta and da Matta were not doing what was required of them. To put Trulli in a car and then find he is out paced by any of their current drivers during a race weekend would be embarrassing to say the least. At least in keeping Zonta in the seat for this race at least it gives Trulli a chance to get up to speed and also become more familiar with the car with the decision over whether he competes to be taken on a race by race basis.

Jordan *(Yellow with BandH graphics)*

Unlike Minardi the Jaguar pull out has more profound implications than just meaning that the team will be searching for an engine next season. It has been an open secret for some time that Eddie Jordan would be willing to sell his team to the right buyer for the right price. Rumors of impending deals with Christian Horner's Arden International Formula 3000 team as well as with the Mahktoum family in Bahrain seemed to be doing the rounds. Unfortunately now Jaguar is plainly on the market (with bigger facilities and more development potential) Jordan is a less appealing prospect. Ford's wishing to dispose of Jaguar for what they can get for it suggests that talks are likely to be more attractive to potential buyers than Eddie Jordan's protracted blarney and all this can do nothing but create increasing uncertainty with the workforce and, more particularly, with the investors and sponsors, many of whose contracts are up for renewal at the end of this season.

Heidfeld

Possibly Nick Heidfeld's best season could also end up being his last. Some great performances and a

team who love him may not be enough for the young German who, despite hauling the uncompetitive EJ14 around to some quite creditable positions during the season, still seems to be left out in the cold as far as drives for next year go. Unless a buyer for Cosworth can be found quickly Jordan will be reliant on another motor manufacturer for engines next season. Both Mercedes and Toyota have made noises about supplying another team in the past few months yet it remains to be seen whether the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Whatever happens the Jordan drivers for next year will need to bring some money with them if they are to compete. This is one thing Nick cannot do with the consequence that we may be seeing the last of Nick Heidfeld on the grid.

Glock

An illustration of how tough life is at the back of the grid comes in the replacement of Giorgio Pantano with test driver Timo Glock. A repetition of the contractual issues that prevented Pantano from racing in Germany seem to have occurred and as a result Eddie Jordan lost his patience with the under performing Pantano and has replaced him with Glock. From the tone of the press release it is clear that Jordan are not prepared to have Pantano back as well and Belgian F3000 race winner Robert Doornbos has been drafted in as test driver. The fact that Doornbos is Dutch is a clear sop to sponsor Trust (who tried installing Dutch driver Jos Verstappen in the number two Jordan before the season started). Glock impressed in Germany and scored points so hopefully he can repeat the trick this time out and give the team a much needed fillip.

Minardi Cosworth (*Black, white sides and rear wing*)

When Minardi boss Paul Stoddart heard of Cosworth's withdrawal from Formula 1 he instinctively did what all right thinking company heads should and called his lawyer. Minardi have a valid agreement to be supplied with Cosworth engines for next season and it is difficult to see how Ford will weasel out of having to meet their contractual commitments short of paying or Minardi to be supplied by one of their rivals! Paul Stoddart seems anything but perplexed by the current state of affairs. He knows that Cosworth have been around since the mid 60s and are unlikely to not be snapped up. General Motors and Volkswagen are known to be interested as are Red Bull and there are even some rumors that David Richards Prodrive would be interested in taking them on as a going concern. Whatever happens Stoddart said that Minardi will certainly be on the grid next season. Considering Stoddy doesn't normally give that assurance until February that shows that the team's future must be secure.

Bruni

Probably the most impressive fact about Bruni's season is that he made it to the end! A spectacular performer in F3000 Gianmaria's debut Formula 1 season has been anything but impressive. The tremendous refueling fire in Italy is said to have left Bruni asphyxiated and his missing part of last week's test showed that the effects were more than just a shortness of breath. More to the point Bruni has retired healthy cars twice this season and barbed comments have not been short in coming from his team boss' mouth. Despite all this (and some of Bruni's backers defaulting) he is still driving for Minardi. Alonso or Webber he is not but there is still a chance for him in another series even though his Formula 1 adventure looks unlikely to extend beyond this season.

Baumgartner

One could have said the same for Zsolt! Baumgartner has tried his hardest and at times matched his more talented teammate. There is no doubt that Zsolt has not got the natural talent to make it in Formula 1 on his own. Despite this the flow of money from Hungarian and other Eastern European sponsors has been invaluable to Minardi this year as they have struggled away at the back of the field. Zsolt may well become one of a very select few to drive for Minardi for more than one season. It just depends whether Zsolt can find the money and whether Minardi are still in desperate need of it!

Alex's 2004 Italian Grand Prix Predictions

Qualifying

1. Michael Schumacher
2. Rubens Barrichello
3. Fernando Alonso

Race

1. Michael Schumacher
2. Kimi Raikkonen
3. Rubens Barrichello