

Mercedes AMG F1 Team Wins Nico Rosberg edges Lewis



Article Kevin Ehrlich | photos courtesy Mercedes-Benz



As the Formula One season emerged from its summer break, Mercedes hoped to put the inter-squad disputes for track space between their drivers behind them and make the move to wrapping up the manufacturers and driver titles. The Mercedes AMG driver duo of Nico

A night-time photograph of the Singapore Flyer, a massive Ferris wheel, illuminated against a dark blue sky. In the foreground, a race track barrier with 'SINGAPORE AIRLINES' branding is visible, along with a track surface marked with yellow and white lines. The text 's Constructor Championship; Hamilton for Drivers' Title' is overlaid in large, white, bold letters across the upper portion of the image.

s Constructor Championship; Hamilton for Drivers' Title

Rosberg and Lewis Hamilton were clearly running in a class of their own with others like Red Bull and Ferrari trying to make inroads where possible.

The Mercedes AMG F1 team comfortably wrapped up the team title, but the chase for the driver title went down to the last laps of the last race in Abu Dhabi. While Hamilton won the race, Rosberg kept close and was able to claim the title.

Mercedes AMG was dominant. Over the course of the 21-race season, Mercedes AMG only failed to win pole position once – in Monaco. Hamilton won 10 races, Rosberg 9 races and the two Red Bull drivers split the remaining two races.

Here is how the run to the season title unfolded.

Spa Francorchamps, Belgium



The first port of call out of the summer break was the natural terrain road course of Spa Francorchamps in the south-eastern corner of Belgium that is home to the Ardennes forest. At 4.3 miles in length, the track is fast and a driver favorite. The weather can be unpredictable but good weather coupled with Dutch enthusiasm for rookie Max Verstappen produced an enormous crowd for the race.

Nico Rosberg took pole by a slim margin over Red Bull and Ferrari while Hamilton went through a sequence of multiple engine changes. Formula One targets engines to run multiple races and imposes a penalty once teams start to change beyond a permitted number of engines. Hamilton's engine woes earlier in the season meant that he would incur penalties at some point. Once it became clear penalties were inevitable, the team cycled through multiple engines during the weekend – taking a penalty for each change. Once situated at the back of the grid, additional grid penalties would be meaningless, so the team opted to change engines and take penalties in the one race rather than adversely impact future races.

It is a clever read of the rules and fully legal, but also created odd incentives and a lot of work for the mechanics.

Rosberg converted his pole position into his 20th career Formula One win, but the story would be Hamilton's comeback drive. He finished 3rd after starting 21st through a combination of his own

passing and retirements of other cars caught up in incidents.

The race stopped briefly for barrier repair after huge accident for Kevin Magnussen in the Renault at the top of the very fast Eau Rouge corner. While it was a spectacular crash that shredded the car and deformed the barrier, Magnussen fortunately suffered nothing more than a bruised ankle.

The strong recovery drive for Hamilton deprived Rosberg for what could have been a golden opportunity to make material ground in the points. While Rosberg had a perfect weekend, Hamilton left Spa holding on to a 9-point championship lead.

Monza, Italy

Monza is one of the host historic tracks of the Formula One calendar and one of the fastest. Situated in a leafy park north and east of Milan, the track is unapologetically several long straights stitched together with modest corners. The location in Italy means that the Ferrari fans come out in force.



The Mercedes AMG power advantage shone through as

Hamilton and Rosberg were clearly fastest in practice. Hamilton dominated qualifying, claiming pole with almost a half a second gap over Rosberg with the two Ferraris next in line.

At the start, Hamilton bogged down and dropped to sixth. He worked his way back up to within 15 seconds of Rosberg to finish second, but Rosberg was never seriously challenged for the win. With Rosberg's success, Hamilton's championship lead shrunk to two points.

Starts have been a weak spot for the Mercedes team, hobbling both Rosberg and Hamilton at different times during the 2016 season. The clutch was believed to be the source of the issue but Hamilton said after Monza that there was no quick fix. He said the problem was irregular which made it difficult to solve.

While Monza was on the race calendar, September saw a growing amount of chatter looking forward. With new regulations taking effect in 2017, most of the teams have turned their energy

to designing cars for next season. Pirelli as the sole tire supplier has been doing the same as well. Mercedes got its first laps on 2017 tires at a test at Paul Ricard in France with driver Pascal Wehrlein running a modified 2015 car with materially more downforce than the 2016 versions. Away from the track, the rights to control Formula One were sold to Liberty Media in a multi-billion-dollar deal. Interestingly, Liberty Media has deep American roots with holdings ranging from Time Warner and Viacom to the Atlanta Braves. Formula One finances are sufficiently opaque and complex to preclude a broader discussion of the details and implications, but it will be interesting to see if the relationship between the teams and those that own the commercial and business side of Formula One changes going forward.

Singapore

Across the world from Italy, the series moved to the very tight and twisty street course in Singapore. The Singapore event is one of the newer races on the Formula One calendar starting in 2008, but the night racing format is quite unique and provides all manner of visual lighting opportunities to enhance the glamor and excitement.



Both Mercedes drivers showed speed in practice but Rosberg had a minor touch with the wall and suffered brake issues while Hamilton had his second practice cut short with hydraulic issues and also encountered braking issues. Hamilton's issues cost valuable track time that haunted him through the weekend.

Rosberg set the pole position time, comfortably outrunning Daniel Ricciardo's Red Bull while Hamilton settled for third after continued to be hampered with braking problems.

Braking issues challenged both Hamilton and Rosberg during the night race under the lights, but the weekend was flawless for Rosberg. Team Boss Toto Wolff said it was the best performance throughout a weekend for Rosberg that he had ever seen. Rosberg lead from pole and controlled the race, holding off a charging Ricciardo in the Red Bull at the checkered flag as Rosberg managed his brakes. Rosberg's dominant win was the third in a row and gave him an 8-point gap over Hamilton.

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Once again, both Mercedes drivers were the class of the field in practice at the 3.4-mile track near Kuala Lumpur, the national capital of Malaysia, but practice doesn't pay the points. Hamilton

appeared to reverse his poor recent fortune with a dominant qualifying position while Rosberg struggled a bit but still edged the two Red Bull cars of Max Verstappen and Daniel Ricciardo.

During the race, it was Rosberg's turn for a recovery drive after contact with Sebastian Vettel in the Ferrari in the first turn resulted in a spin and put him back in the field. He recovered to finish third and extend his points lead over Hamilton who was dominating the race when his



engine failed with 15 laps remaining. Daniel Ricciardo in the Red Bull won the race, earning his only win for the year and one of only two wins during the entire 2016 season for any team other than Mercedes AMG.

The failure was terribly dispiriting for Hamilton who expressed frustration and wonderment why his engines appeared to have failed more than others during the season. For its part, team boss Toto Wolf vowed to leave no stone unturned to find the source and prevent further engine failures. The team said later that the problem was a bearing in the crankshaft that was preceded by a loss of oil pressure which is specific enough to provide something for a press release but vague enough to keep specifics within the team.

Suzuka, Japan

Remaining in the Pacific-Asia region, the next round took place at Suzuka in Japan. Rosberg ran at the head of the field for all the practice sessions before barely edging Hamilton in qualifying for the pole. Toto Wolff confirmed after qualifying that the team had been a bit more conservative with the Mercedes engines to avoid more failures (which must come as little comfort when the more conservative engines are still sufficient to power the team to a sweep of the front row in qualifying).

Rosberg again dominated the race, winning from pole with a 5 second gap at the checkered flag to increase his points lead to 33. Hamilton again had a poor start, slipped back to eighth, and spent the rest of the race recovering back up the field to finish third. Hamilton was unable to pass Max Verstappen in the Red Bull for second, but the dice with Verstappen was heated and generated post-race discussion on whether his tactics were fair or pushed the limits of blocking too far.



Beyond the track, the media headlines also revolved around Hamilton's lack of interest in participating in the mandatory press conferences. Certainly frustrated by the reliability issues and tired of answering the same questions, Hamilton directed media members to his social media accounts rather than answer questions and sent out photos of himself adorned

with bunny ears during the press conference. Apparently, social media bunny ears are what passes for controversy and driver news in modern-day Formula One (end editorial comment).

The first and third place finishes were enough to clinch the manufacturer's championship for Mercedes AMG. While much of the media attention focuses on individual drivers and the drivers' title, the teams value the constructors title for a wide range for business, economic and reputation reasons. Drivers may come and go, but constructor championships cement a legacy for the marque which is the ultimate priority. Drivers may get the attention, but they are employees of the team.

Austin, Texas

The weather in Austin, Texas for Formula One's only stop in the United States was beautiful – far better than the 2015 rainstorms. The racing didn't offer much in the way of drama and Hamilton continued to gradually close the



points gap to Rosberg. Hamilton again claimed pole and the win while Rosberg completed the Mercedes 1-2. The result was a bit deceptive, however, as Daniel Ricciardo arguably had a second place run interrupted by a safety period caused by the gearbox failure of Max Verstappen, his teammate. The timing hurt Ricciardo and Rosberg was happy to take second place points.

Mexico City

At Mexico City, Rosberg had a chance to clinch the championship but Hamilton built on his momentum with another dominant weekend, claiming both pole position and the race win. Rosberg acknowledged what the world could see - that Hamilton was just plain faster. The first corner saw Hamilton lock up his right front wheel and slide off the track, effectively cutting the first two corners. He ended up with a severe vibration from the flat spot produced by sliding the tire across the pavement. Rosberg and Red Bull's Max Verstappen bumped wheels, sending Rosberg off the track as well. Both arguably gained an advantage but incurred no penalties as wreckage behind them slowed the field and bunched things up.

Rosberg spent more time looking behind him as Verstappen kept close. After tire strategies played out through a relatively quiet race, fireworks erupted behind Hamilton and Rosberg making the final laps the story of the race rather than the Mercedes 1-2 finish.



Verstappen fell away from Rosberg and into the clutches of a charging Ferrari of Sebastian Vettel who was himself being chased by a charging Daniel Ricciardo in the second Red Bull on fresher and grippier tires. Verstappen ran off the track but failed to yield the position to Vettel. Enraged, Vettel stalked Verstappen all the way to the finish. A 5 second penalty to Verstappen moved him behind Vettel cost him third place on the podium. With some bemusement, Hamilton and Rosberg chatted amongst themselves while the drama sorted itself out. Vettel eventually found his way to the podium where he claimed the trophy and sprayed the Champagne – only to be assessed a 10 second penalty by the stewards hours after the race for “erratic” driving behavior in his defense

against Ricciardo. While he crossed the line in fifth, the tumult promoted Ricciardo to third which was sufficient for him to clinch third place for the drivers' championship.

The win for Hamilton was his 51st – enough to tie him with legendary driver Alain Prost for second place on the all-time Formula One winner list. Only Michael Schumacher has more at 91 wins.

Sao Paulo, Brazil

The headline in Brazil was rain. Hamilton earned the pole in dry conditions on Saturday ahead of Rosberg, but heavy rain delayed the race start by ten minutes and caused the first seven laps were run behind the safety car. The race saw many incidents as the cars struggled for grip.

Hamilton leapt out to an early and significant lead before the race was halted after 20 laps of running due to the wet conditions. A 35-minute intermission ensued before re-starting when Hamilton again eased out to a lead. Rookie Max Verstappen took his Red Bull past Nico Rosberg on the restart with an impressive pass. Verstappen's pace encouraged the team to bring both Red Bull cars into the pits to switch from full wet tires to intermediate tires, but the move was premature and cost valuable track position.

Brazilian Felipe Massa crashed his Williams car in his last home race of his Formula One career. An emotional Massa walked in tears with a Brazilian flag saluting the fans as the fans and teams saluted him. His crash brought out a safety car which allowed the Red Bull cars to switch back to full wet tires and set up a 15-lap sprint to the end.

While Hamilton and Rosberg took first and second places with little additional drama, Verstappen quickly climbed up the field from 16th to earn a third-place podium position. The drive in the wet was electric and became the main talking point of the race.



The finishing order meant that the driver's championship was yet undecided and resolution would require one more race.

Abu Dhabi

Weather would not be an issue in Abu Dhabi, but the race started in the late afternoon and finished under the lights. The points standings coming into the race still tilted to Rosberg's favor. Hamilton appeared to have the momentum but the argument was whether Rosberg was merely managing the risks rather than pushing the attack. After all, he had the point lead and could afford to put the pressure on Hamilton.

Rosberg would win the title if he finished in the top three regardless of Hamilton's finish. That meant that even if Hamilton won, he needed Rosberg to finish fourth or worse. That situation would drive the key narrative for the race.



Hamilton again edged Rosberg for pole position on Saturday and got a good start on Sunday when the race got underway. He pulled away to a comfortable lead of about 5 seconds before pit stop strategy started to mix up the field.

Max Verstappen spun on the first lap and rejoined at the rear, but quickly sliced through much of the field. He stayed out when others made pit stops which placed him right in the midst of the title contenders. While Verstappen extended his first stint, Sebastian Vettel in the Ferrari extended his middle stint which meant that he was the last of the front runners to make his final pit. That strategy gave him much fresher and quicker tires for the last 20 laps or so. He made the most of the tires and found himself in fourth in short order.

Meanwhile, Hamilton remained at the head of the field with Rosberg close behind. Was Rosberg faster or Hamilton slower? The stopwatch told the tale – Hamilton was going just fast enough to hold up Rosberg and allow Verstappen and Vettel to catch up and hopefully overtake Rosberg.

Despite team orders explicitly instructing Hamilton to pick up the pace, he continued his tactics bringing the top four to within a second of each other and easily in the same camera shot. Vettel got by Verstappen for third, but the German certainly was not going to risk impacting the championship by trying a high-risk pass on Rosberg.

Hamilton claimed the race win with Rosberg and Vettel close behind, clinching the driver's championship for Rosberg. The emotion flowed and a jubilant Rosberg did celebratory donuts on the front stretch and shared energetic hugs and hand-shakes with his team and family. Ironically, Rosberg's father Keke – himself a world champion in 1982 – opted to watch the race from Dubai rather than being a distraction at the track. He made the short drive after the race and the family was able to celebrate together.



Nico Rosberg entered Formula One in 2006 with the Williams team. Ten years later, as a 31-year old husband and father, earned his first world championship. Spectators will debate whether Rosberg has the outright pace of Hamilton but Rosberg carefully managed each battle to ensure he could win the war.



Looking Ahead

Both Rosberg and Hamilton benefitted from Mercedes AMG machinery – clearly the best car of the field. With Hamilton’s 2014 and 2015 titles, Rosberg’s 2016 title makes it three driver’s championships in a row to go along with the three constructor’s championships. That degree of dominance is impressive in such a competitive environment. 2017 will bring rules changes and all of the teams have begun their work on their 2017 entries many months ago, so it will be interesting to see what a new season brings when the Formula One circus reconvenes in March 2017 in Melbourne.