

— *FORMULA 1* —

This file contains race reports from each of the 1998 season Grands Prix, originally published at Gareth's Web Site (website.lineone.net/~gareth_holroyd).

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c. Gareth Holroyd, 1998

Australian Grand Prix, Melbourne, March 1998

"Unsatisfactory" was Mika Hakkinen's description of his second gift wrapped victory in a row, and it might have applied to the whole 1998 Australian Grand Prix.

Despite all the rule changes and pre-season hype the new F1 year has started in exactly the same way that the old finished, with David Coulthard letting his team mate through for a hollow victory and depriving F1 fans of a true race winner. Admittedly Villeneuve didn't have to wave the McLarens through this time - he was lapped - and Schumacher's retirement was caused by an engine explosion rather than a driver explosion but ... plus ca change!



The only person with a smile on his face was Ron Dennis, whose McLaren team were so far ahead of the rest of the field that they may as well take the constructor trophy now - unless the Max and Bernie show comes up with some rule changes to give everybody else a chance.

David Coulthard didn't get his usual stunning start, and had to be content with following Mika into the first corner. Apparently the race was decided then, due to some gentleman's agreement, but we didn't know that at the time. The McLarens headed off into the distance leaving Michael Schumacher's Ferrari puffing in their wake. The puffs turned into a cloud of smoke on lap 6, and that was the end of the first race of Ferrari's 'championship' season. Michael's body language said it all.

Nobody else was even close. Villeneuve was holding up Fisichella and Herbert and, although Fisichella was perhaps being excessively cautious in the early stages, overtaking doesn't seem to be any easier under the new regulations than the old. Magnussen took Ralf Schumacher off in a suicidal attempt on lap 1 and Fisichella eventually managed to get past Frentzen on lap 38, before taking the cross-country route into retirement several laps later. That was about it for overtaking excitement apart from the McLarens lapping everyone.

Frentzen slipped largely unnoticed up the field - certainly unnoticed by the Australian TV producer anyway - and might have passed some cars on the way to his eventual distant third position, or it might have been his one stop pit strategy that paid off, it was hard to tell.

Rookie Tuero provided a bit of unintentional light relief. Firstly, he was given a stop-go penalty for jumping the start, then another one for speeding in the pit lane whilst serving the former. Then his engine blew up. He will need a sense of humour to get through this season!



Just as we were nodding off on lap 36 Hakkinen inexplicably drove into the pit lane, to the astonishment of his crew (who weren't there) and everybody else. He passed straight through, effectively handing the race on a plate to Coulthard, or so we thought. The post-race press conference lacked the obvious question ("why did you do that Mika?") so we have to assume a brainstorm.

Hakkinen was obviously upset and began driving like a man possessed. When he and his crew eventually managed to make the pits at the same time there was further confusion as the rear wheels started spinning

while the car was still in the air, risking life and limb for the unfortunate mechanic trying to tighten the left rear wheelnut.

However, Hakkinen needn't have worried. Coulthard eased off 2 laps from home and allowed him through. There are many of us who feel, whatever the pre-race agreement, that Hakkinen was the author of his own misfortune whereas Coulthard drove a flawless race and deserved to take his victory. These agreements can't be good for the sport.

Eddie Irvine made 4th after chasing Frentzen for long periods, Villeneuve was a subdued 5th and Johnny Herbert a creditable 6th, having blown his new team mate Alesi off the track in qualifying.

Only 9 made it to the finish, Damon Hill being last but one in 8th. There will be a new expression in the English language soon - Damon's luck. After all, how many other drivers have been thrown out of their team after winning the championship, suffer mechanical failure one lap from home whilst leading for the one and only time the following season and then move to a team whose car development appears to have gone backwards over the winter? Only Damon.

Still it could be worse, at least he finished the race this year. Don't talk to Michael Schumacher about that ...



Brazilian Grand Prix, Sao Paulo, March 1998



Mika Hakkinen has had races in the past that he deserved to win, but didn't through mechanical failure. He has won his last two races, but didn't deserve to. Finally, he has won and deserved it - and you wouldn't bet against it being the first of many this season.

Predictably, McLaren ran away with the Brazilian Grand Prix despite Ferrari's success in getting independent rear wheel braking declared illegal. It made little difference. From first and second on the grid Mika and team mate David Coulthard disappeared into the distance and lapped everybody bar Michael Schumacher and Alexander Wurz.

The race was more interesting than Australia, although most of the excitement came from further down the field. Johnny Herbert overtook Jarno Trulli well early on, while Eddie Irvine made an amazing start and jumped to fourth from sixth on the grid, passing team mate Michael Schumacher who dropped to sixth behind Wurz. Schumacher quickly took Wurz and a few laps later Eddie had to take a wide corner to let the Ferrari number 1 through in pursuit of Heinz-Harald Frentzen. Schumacher closed on Frentzen and spent a good number of laps psyching him out, but without success.

Jacques Villeneuve also had a good start, although from 10th on the grid he was never going to be running with the leaders. He jumped to seventh and harried Wurz until the early pit stops began.

Ralf Schumacher crashed out for the second race in succession, this time only making the fourth corner before missing his breaking point and spinning into the gravel. Eddie Jordan must wish Ralf had inherited a few more of his brother's genes.

It quickly became apparent that the McLaren's domination was, even now, understated as they were running a one-stop strategy. As the Ferrari and Williams teams pitted for the first of two stops the McLarens extended their lead and Wurz's Benetton, also on a one-stop strategy, assumed third place.

Michael Schumacher showed his class in pitting ahead of Frentzen, just before the Williams ran into some backmarker traffic. The slow in-lap was enough to give Schumacher the edge and Frentzen lost the place.

Villeneuve, having lost position during the pit stop, worked his way back up the field passing Herbert, Panis, Irvine and Alesi but was still well out of contention and, indeed, was lapped for the second time this season finishing just out of the points in seventh.



Rumours that Hakkinen and Coulthard had time for a coffee in the pits are probably exaggerated, but not by much. Wurz, who had been having an excellent race, showed his inexperience in the pits as he missed first gear and then ran very wide in the exit lane. This ultimately cost him two places as the effect of the second stops unravelled and he found himself in fifth behind Schumacher and Frentzen.

However, Wurz redeemed himself on lap 55 with the best move of the race. He took advantage of a slight error by Frentzen and sneaked up the inside just before the pit exit lane, only to see Schumacher emerge after his second stop fractions of a second ahead. Schumacher himself was thankful to retain his third place having lost the engine momentarily in the pits, but fortunately it restarted first time.

From then on it was a procession to the finish, no juggling of positions this time. Hakkinen deservedly

crossed the line first ahead of Coulthard, having been quicker than his team mate all weekend. Schumacher seemed happy enough with third in the circumstances and Wurz was overjoyed with fourth. Frentzen in fifth and Fisichella in sixth completed the points positions.

Damon's luck struck again. Things looked promising after good testing times in Barcelona. However, he was only 11th on the grid, had a poor start, dropped to 14th, and eventually finished a distant 10th. He then had to suffer the ignominy of being disqualified for a weight infringement on the car. Better luck next time!



Argentine Grand Prix, Buenos Aires, April 1998

Three races into the season and the picture of total McLaren domination which seemed to be forming has suddenly changed. As predicted by Eddie Irvine (and almost nobody else), Michael Schumacher stormed to victory in the Argentine Grand Prix with a gritty and aggressive drive, together with his share of luck when he needed it.

But that's not the whole story, for the McLaren drivers had their opportunities and maybe it should have been their day after all.



David Coulthard sat on pole alongside Michael Schumacher and as Mika Hakkinen beat Schumacher into the first corner from third on the grid another McLaren one-two looked on the cards. However, Hakkinen slowed, apparently to try to bottle the Ferrari up and allow Coulthard to get away, but Schumacher was smarter and slipped past on only the second lap.

David Coulthard then seemed to throw the race away. On lap 4 he lost several seconds through the chicane to Schumacher, who quickly closed on him. At the same place on lap 5 Coulthard ran wide again and Schumacher dived up the inside. Coulthard cut back in and the cars collided, but it was Coulthard who spun away and back into 6th place whilst Schumacher raced on, apparently unscathed.

Was this a return to the sorry antics of Jerez? No, this was more of what the public want to see :- exciting racing with a brave overtaking manoeuvre. Everybody except Coulthard seemed to be behind Schumacher on this one, including the race stewards!

Further down the field, Eddie Irvine lost out from fourth on the grid to Heinz-Harald Frentzen who jumped from sixth. However, Frentzen surrendered the place again to Irvine on lap two and was subsequently passed by Villeneuve and Alesi before a stop-go penalty later in the race relegated him to ninth. Not a happy day.

Still the race was not won as Hakkinen, who appeared strangely subdued all weekend, began to increase the pace as his fuel load dropped and even set fastest lap at one point. On a one-stop strategy as usual, the McLaren could afford to be no more than about 20 seconds behind the Ferrari when it pitted for the first of two stops.

By the time Schumacher stopped on lap 29 the gap had stabilised at around 12 seconds and Hakkinen assumed the lead, 10 seconds ahead of the Ferrari. Hakkinen maintained this gap until his own stop on lap 42, and should have been in a good position to retake the lead when Schumacher pitted for a second time.

Meanwhile, Jean Alesi was driving his best race yet for Sauber. He made a good start from eleventh on the grid and, despite running over an air hose in the pits and losing one of his winglets, was running fourth behind Eddie Irvine by lap 41. Alexander Wurz was also working his way up the field making the most of a single, late, pitstop to gain track position. He passed Villeneuve and Coulthard during their stops to move into fifth, and later passed Alesi as the Sauber stopped for the second time.



It was now Hakkinen's turn to throw the race away. He lost a lot of time overtaking back markers, particularly Frentzen, and had a dreadful lap when Schumacher came in on lap 53, allowing the Ferrari to rejoin in front. Shortly after, Coulthard had another collision, this time with Villeneuve, putting the Williams out of the race but allowing Fisichella to slip through into sixth position.

Wurz by now had caught Eddie Irvine and began to pressurise him for third place. When Irvine ran wide on lap 65 Wurz dived through and looked to be heading for a podium finish. However, this intriguing race was not finished yet. Suddenly, it started to rain.

Dramatically, Michael Schumacher slid off the track 4 laps from home. However, he calmly took the car through the gravel to the service road behind and rejoined with his lead intact, avoiding a near disaster. In fact, Hakkinen was in no position to take advantage of this slip, and seemed to have settled for a comfortable second.

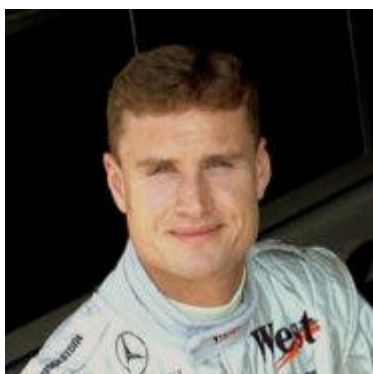
Wurz was another casualty, spinning whilst locking his brakes coming up behind a back marker, and he dropped to fourth allowing Irvine back into third spot. Fisichella also spun off allowing Coulthard into sixth behind Alesi in fifth.

And Damon's luck in Argentina? Well, he will probably be due for lynching by the Johnny Herbert fan club after taking their man out in a 48th lap shunt which knocked the nose cone of Hill's Jordan but punctured Herbert's tyre. Damon pitted and rejoined to finish a distant eighth out of fifteen classified finishers.

So where did McLaren's supremacy go? Was it the new Goodyear tyres on the Ferrari? Did Bridgestone get it wrong this time? Was it that the track didn't suit the aerodynamics of the McLaren? Was it simply that Michael Schumacher was the more motivated of the main contenders, and it was sheer guts and willpower that forced him through? We don't know yet, but the rest of the season to come suddenly looks a whole lot more interesting!



San Marino Grand Prix, Imola, April 1998



Normal service was resumed, more or less, at the San Marino Grand Prix as McLaren occupied the front row of the grid and David Coulthard chalked up his first victory of the season. The result was not gained without a few heart stopping moments for McLaren, as firstly Mika Hakkinen retired with gearbox failure and then Coulthard slowed dramatically on the last few laps to allow Michael Schumacher to close right up at the flag. However, after the excitement of Argentina, San Marino was something of an anti-climax.

At the start the McLarens simply drove away, Coulthard leading from pole, and there was no danger of scraps with Michael Scumacher or anybody else this time. McLaren opted for a two stop strategy and a lighter fuel load, which may have been because of the demands of the track or maybe to ensure their drivers didn't fall into Schumacher's clutches during the early laps. Whichever, it worked.

The two Ferraris lined up on the second row of the grid and Schumacher slotted into third place from the start. Eddie Irvine spun his wheels again and lost out to Jacques Villeneuve, who moved up to fourth from sixth on the grid. Heinz-Harald Frentzen took sixth, behind Irvine, and was followed by Fisichella and Alesi.

Alexander Wurz, fifth on the grid, became stuck in 1st gear and slid rapidly down the field. Unfortunately, Damon Hill was lined up behind him in seventh - his best qualifying performance of the season - and ran straight into the back of the ailing Benetton. Damon had to pit for a new front wing and rejoined in 19th place, just Damon's luck!

The race settled into a bit of a procession, broken only by Hakinnen's retirement on lap 18 and Fisichella spinning off and out of the event shortly afterwards. At the first pit stops both Villeneuve and Frentzen lost out to Irvine and Alesi respectively, although Frentzen managed to regain the place during the second round of stops.



Interest increased towards the end as David Coulthard began to slow, apparently because of concerns in the pits about his oil temperature. Schumacher closed rapidly but McLaren appeared to have the situation under control and there was still a five second gap at the flag. Irvine followed in third, with Villeneuve fourth, Frentzen fifth and Alesi sixth.

Damon caught and passed a few back markers and, aided by retirements and pit stops, found himself in 7th place by lap 59 when he retired himself with engine trouble. There is a feeling that this was a lost opportunity for Jordan, despite Ralf Schumacher finishing his first race of the season in seventh. When will Damon's luck change?

It was good to see David Coulthard bury the demons which must have haunted him after Australia and Argentina, but all in all this was not an exciting race, and we can only hope for more from the Spanish Grand Prix in a fortnight.



Spanish Grand Prix, Barcelona, May 1998

Mika Hakkinen returned to winning ways in the Spanish Grand Prix with an untroubled pole to chequered flag canter. David Coulthard followed him home, slightly behind his team mate all weekend, but the others were nowhere.

The chasing teams were hopeful that, once the Grand Prix circus hit European soil, the gap between McLaren and the rest would close. However, if anything McLaren have increased their domination and the possibilities of an extended scrap raised by Schumacher's triumph in Argentina seem merely to have signalled a false dawn.

For the second race in succession we witnessed little more than a procession as the McLarens disappeared into the distance from the front row of the grid. Eddie Irvine made a superb start, passing both Benetton's and his own teammate to move into third, with Fisichella retaining fourth and Michael Schumacher surprisingly dropping to fifth.

Wurz completed the top six with Rubens Barrichello, hardly a name to figure amongst the front runners recently, making the most of an excellent ninth place qualifying performance to move up to seventh in the Stewart. Villeneuve, a disappointing tenth on the grid, also made a good start to slot into eighth position.

And that's how it stayed until the first pit stops when a bit of Schumacher's legendary tactical astuteness came into play. A blistering in-lap, a low fuel intake and the Ferrari rejoined in third ahead of teammate Irvine and Fisichella. If there was any collusion it wasn't obvious, although it couldn't be now, could it?



However, it all became academic shortly afterwards on lap 30 when Fisichella tried an ambitious overtaking manoeuvre on Irvine but turned in too early resulting in them both spinning off into the gravel trap and out of the race. As always, both drivers blamed each other, although Irvine was remarkably serene in the circumstances and Fisichella's finger-pointing looked a little foolish as it appeared to be his error.

So Wurz inherited fourth place, Barrichello fifth and Villeneuve sixth, and that's how it finished. The only other moment of drama came when we learnt that Schumacher's earlier lightning pit stop had in fact been partially achieved by speeding in the pitlane and the Ferrari was called in to serve a 10 second stop-go penalty.

This resulted in Schumacher losing third place to Wurz. However, during the second round of stops the tactical mastery became apparent again as Wurz emerged from the pits behind a train of backmarkers whilst Schumacher timed it to perfection and regained his third position.

Damon's luck was out again this weekend, now there's a surprise! Having mastered the art of out qualifying his teammate he seems to have lost the ability to make a good start or finish a race. Eighth on the grid, Hill immediately lost two places and ran behind Johnny Herbert until tangling with Frentzen as the latter left the pits. Hill recovered from his trip through the gravel only to suffer engine failure shortly afterwards on lap 48.

So, they banned X-wings for this race and, although the cars look a little prettier as a result, it didn't improve the racing. One move amongst the front runners, resulting in an off, was all we saw. If there had been a

tactical battle to compensate it might have been better but, Schumacher apart, there was none of that either.
Has anybody got any suggestions? Answers on a postcard to Mr B Ecclestone....



Monaco Grand Prix, Monte Carlo, May 1998



The Monaco Grand Prix has its own kind of magic:- the paddock packed with celebrities, the harbour packed with millionaires' yachts, a tight street circuit with no room for error - and Mika Hakkinen on the winners rostrum again! The McLaren juggernaut ignored the distractions, kept out of trouble and rolled on to yet another famous victory.

Although the pitlane had an unusual look about it, with everyone from Sylvester Stallone to Fergie making an appearance (and Elizabeth Hurley supporting Eddie Irvine with the splendid reasoning that "he's cute"), the grid looked ominously familiar.

Hakkinen and David Coulthard on the front row, Giancarlo Fisichella qualifying well for Benetton in third with Michael Schumacher behind, and Heinz-Harald Frentzen and Alexander Wurz completing the top six. Irvine was seventh with Mika Salo an excellent eighth, having found the lack of power in his Arrows less of a handicap on the twisting, narrow circuit than elsewhere.

Monte Carlo is more about glamour than overtaking but the drivers love the circuit because it is so demanding - and unforgiving - and there are often surprising results brought about by mistakes or accidents, pitstop strategy or even the weather. However, this year saw perfect conditions, very few mistakes and even a couple of muscly overtaking manoeuvres from the Ferrari duo.

The lights went green and the grid moved round the circuit, with only Frentzen and Wurz swapping places amongst the leaders. Coulthard had an early moment at the chicane, which let Hakkinen get away, but otherwise we had to wait until lap 9 for the first real action. Eddie Irvine, no doubt out to prove he's not that cute, had been harassing Frentzen for a little while and when the Williams man ran slightly wide at the hairpin Eddie barged up the inside, forcing Frentzen into the side fencing and out of the race at the same time.

Coulthard, who had looked evenly matched with Hakkinen this weekend (the pair swapped provisional pole several times during qualifying), was beginning to claw back some ground when, without warning his engine exploded on lap 17. Mika was left 19 seconds clear of the field whilst David had to rue another missed opportunity and a drivers championship that is looking increasingly one-sided.

Further back, Michael Schumacher in third place and unable to make an impression on Fisichella, once again exercised his legendary pit stop cunning and came in early on lap 30 just as the pair began to hit back markers. Although Fisichella pitted the following lap, a combination of a quicker stop by the Ferrari and the traffic encountered by the Benetton on the in lap left Michael out in front and free to chase the McLarens. The only problem being that Wurz was still out on the track and had now inherited third spot.

Schumacher caught Wurz, who had been slowed by Diniz and a group of cars in front, without problem but overtaking on the track, rather than in the pits, is still pretty difficult at Monaco. On lap 38 Schumacher tried the inside line at the hairpin and squeezed past only for Wurz to fight back and regain the spot.

Unfortunately, Alexander then ran a little wide at the next right hander and the two cars collided. Although Schumacher emerged in front he was forced to pull into the pits with a broken track rod.

Michael was out of the car but Ross Brawn was having none of that and the mechanics made the repair, with Schumacher rejoining 16th and last. Wurz stayed out on the track until lap 43 when he pitted, allowing Fisichella back into third place. However, on the first lap out of the pits Wurz's car suddenly disintegrated through the tunnel and he tobogganed into the safety barrier minus front wheels. Alexander was OK but the accident was generally agreed to be a legacy of the Schumacher incident.



This was a shame as the scrap had been the highlight of the race, but both drivers were knocked out of contention as a result. Still, it is likely to have increased Wurz's standing in the paddock and it was good to hear Michael dismiss it as a racing incident rather than resort to the "his fault" whingeing which we so often hear from drivers these days.

The various retirements had allowed a few other drivers into points positions, although the field was well spread out by this time. Behind Hakkinen and Fisichella was Irvine who had driven a lonely race since his scrap with Frentzen. Jean Alesi, who had gained a couple of places at the start from eleventh on the grid, suddenly found himself in fourth place followed by Mika Salo in fifth, although these positions would reverse when Alesi made his second pit stop.

Surprisingly, Jacques Villeneuve was sixth after an appalling qualifying session (thirteenth position) but a one-stop strategy and an uneventful drive saw him in the points. Even more surprisingly, Pedro Diniz was running seventh in the second Arrows.

As the race entered its last quarter Fisichella lost concentration for a moment, clipped a barrier and spun. Fortunately he was able to keep the engine running and executed a superb recovery manouevre, reminiscent of Schumacher last year, to rejoin the race without losing position. In the last eight laps Alesi's Sauber began to smoke badly and the engine finally gave out four laps from home, which must have been extremely frustrating for the Frenchman having worked so hard for his position.

Villeneuve inherited fifth and Diniz found himself, unaccustomedly, with a point. Even this was nearly lost on the last lap when Michael Schumacher, who had been charging but to little effect, almost took the Arrows out in a suicidal passing attempt. Fortunately, Michael thought better of it and threw himself into the barrier to avoid the collision.

So another convincing McLaren victory, and a commendable second place for Giancarlo Fisichella, answering some of his critics. However, team of the day were Arrows, with Mika Salo in fourth and Diniz in sixth, in fact the only team to get both cars home. This must have been particularly ironic to Damon Hill, whose own luck took another turn for the worse in the Jordan. Fifteenth in qualifying and demoted to sixteenth at the start he did at least manage to finish in eighth as a poor consolation.



Canadian Grand Prix, Montreal, June 1998

Wow, what a race! If it's thrills and spills you look for in a motor race then the Canadian Grand Prix had it in spades, with Michael Schumacher romping home ahead of a trail of mayhem and destruction.

It had seemed like business as usual during qualifying, with David Coulthard and Mika Hakkinen on the front row, Schumacher in third and the improving Giancarlo Fisichella in fourth. Ralf Schumacher was, surprisingly, in fifth with the Jordan and Jacques Villeneuve completed the top six on his home track.



However, right from the start the script started to go wrong. Michael Schumacher got a brilliant start and jumped into second place behind Coulthard, whilst his brother Ralf stalled on the grid causing some consternation to the midfield qualifiers. This resulted in a tidal wave of five cars abreast surging towards the first corner, and you just knew that five into one wasn't going to work.

Alexander Wurz, somewhat optimistically, had raced up the inside but was left with no corner to turn into. He ran onto the grass but couldn't make the turn and caught Jean Alesi's Sauber, spectacularly cartwheeling across the track and collecting the unfortunate Jarno Trulli and Johnny Herbert in the process. The race was immediately red flagged as Wurz, minus front wheels for the second race running, emerged unhurt from the wreckage and made a sprint back to the pits for the spare car.

Everybody made it back to the grid for the restart, in either spare or repaired cars, and they tried again. This time it was Fisichella who got the best start, moving into second behind Coulthard, whilst Hakkinen suddenly found himself without third gear and was effectively out of the race. Schumacher, stung by his poor start, passed Fisichella again almost immediately.

However, more mayhem ensued when Ralf Schumacher, having got away this time, spun at the first corner. He pirouetted across the track and collected the extremely unlucky Alesi and Trulli :- two cars wrecked apiece without even completing the first corner!

This time the safety car was brought out and the field lined up behind it :- Coulthard followed by Schumacher and Fisichella, then the Williams pair of Villeneuve and Heinz-Harald Frentzen and in an excellent sixth spot was Rubens Barrichello, who managed to drive his Stewart Ford safely through the debris from thirteenth on the grid.

The safety car pulled in on lap 6 and Barrichello set off like a man possessed. He dived past Frentzen before the end of the lap and two laps later took Villeneuve also. He quickly set off after Fisichella but on lap 10 overdid it slightly and ran off the track as he closed on the Benetton. This undid all his good work and he rejoined seventh, behind Damon Hill who had been 10th on the grid.

Still more drama was to come, however, as Pedro Diniz in the Arrows spun off onto the grass from ninth position. He kept the engine running and managed to rejoin, but brought with him a number of loose tufts which he distributed around the track on his way back to the pits. The safety car came out for the second time to allow the mess to be cleared up.

By lap 17 the field was running again. At the front, Schumacher was harrying Coulthard and it looked as if a repeat of Argentina was on the cards. Unfortunately, our enjoyment of this little battle came to an end on lap 19 when the McLaren expired for the second race running, this time with a throttle linkage problem.



Shortly afterwards Schumacher made the first of his two pitstops and rejoined at exactly the same point on the track as Frentzen, forcing the Williams man off the track. Schumacher claimed not to have known he was there, although as it is generally accepted that Schumacher knows EVERYTHING about his pitstops not many people believed him. Nevertheless, his punishment was a relatively minor 10 second stop-go penalty later in the race.

Just after this - and it was hard to keep up with all the action - Mika Salo and Johnny Herbert had a coming together and guess what, the safety car was out again. Fisichella led Villeneuve at this point, with Schumacher third and Hill fourth. The various retirements and the effect of early pitstops now meant that Jan Magnussen in the second Stewart Ford has inherited fifth place and Shinji Nakano in the Minardi was sixth!

The constant bunching up caused by the safety car was helping some of those further down the field to catch up, such as Olivier Panis, Wurz and Eddie Irvine, who had had an early puncture. Nakano's position was under threat, and over the next few laps all three were to pass the Minardi, although Panis spun off not long afterwards.

From the restart Villeneuve began to attack Fisichella and steamed past the Benetton to lead for one glorious moment, for the first time this season, in front of his home crowd. Unfortunately the moment was all too brief as Villeneuve was unable to make the corner, overshot and as he rejoined was hit by Tuero's Minardi. Although repairs were made Villeneuve was several laps down and effectively out of it.

Meanwhile, Schumacher was forced to serve his stop-go penalty for the Frentzen incident and rejoined third, behind Fisichella and Hill. This didn't last long :- although Hill tried to hold the Ferrari off, Schumacher was simply too quick and retook second position on lap 38. Further heartbreak was to follow for Hill as his Jordan, unused to competing for a podium position, developed an electrical fault on lap 43 causing his retirement. Just Damon's luck!

Fisichella finally stopped for his only pitstop on lap 45 but had been losing too much time to Schumacher who was able to take the lead. As the effects of the pitstops and retirements worked through Irvine now found himself in third place followed by Wurz, Barrichello and Magnussen.

However, Schumacher still had a stop to make but began to put together a series of sensational laps to open up a gap over Fisichella. When he stopped on lap 50 there was only a split second in it, but Schumacher rejoined with the blue Benetton very big in his mirrors indeed. It was enough though, and this action packed race rolled on to conclusion with no further drama.

A good day for Ferrari, with Schumacher's second victory of the season and Irvine in third also. A good day for Benetton, with Fisichella second and Wurz, having destroyed his car in the opening shunt, driving the spare to an excellent fourth. A good day for Stewart, collecting fifth and sixth places respectively with Barrichello and Magnussen. And a good day for Formula 1 :- an exciting race with plenty of incident, and a drivers championship which looks alive again after the McLaren retirements.



French Grand Prix, Magny-Cours, June 1998



Suddenly, everybody is talking about Ferrari and the championship in the same breath, as Michael Schumacher claimed his third victory of the season at Magny-Cours in the French Grand Prix. Team mate Eddie Irvine finished second to complete the first Ferrari whitewash since the days of Prost and Mansell. McLaren stumbled again and, despite their exceptional early season form, now only have an eleven point lead in the constructors championship whilst Schumacher is only six points behind Mika Hakkinen in the drivers championship.

The race promised to be a close one with Schumacher splitting the two McLaren drivers on the grid, Hakkinen on his accustomed pole position and David Coulthard an unhappy third. Irvine took fourth spot followed by Jacques Villeneuve's Williams and the Jordans of Ralf Schumacher and Damon Hill respectively.

Schumacher initially got a poor start, but the race was immediately stopped because Jos Verstappen, replacing the hapless Magnussen in the Stewart team, stalled on the grid. Riding his luck, at the second attempt Schumacher got a better start and moved ahead of Hakkinen. His start was bettered only by that of Irvine, who got a blinder and jumped into second place ahead of both McLarens.

Coulthard momentarily lost fourth spot to Villeneuve, but quickly regained it, and this pair were followed by the two Jordan drivers who maintained grid position. Alexander Wurz got a good start, jumping from tenth on the grid to eighth, followed by Jean Alesi in the Sauber who moved from eleventh to ninth.

It didn't take long for Damon's luck to take a turn for the worse, and by lap sixteen he was struggling with a throttle hydraulic problem. Despite a couple of desperate pit stops he retired on lap 19. He was quickly followed into the pits by Ralf Schumacher, who broke his front suspension in a scrape with Wurz, and although it was repaired he rejoined three laps down. Another unhappy weekend for Eddie Jordan.

Meanwhile, the McLarens were pressurising Eddie Irvine but Mika Hakkinen pushed a little too hard on lap 20 and spun, rejoining fourth behind Coulthard. The following lap Coulthard passed Irvine through traffic, and immediately Michael Schumacher made his first pitstop. With the defensive barrier of Irvine removed the last thing he wanted was a pair of McLarens in his mirrors.



David Coulthard, however, appears determined to take on Damon Hill in a contest to see who can have the most bad luck. Coulthard followed Schumacher into the pits but was hampered by a malfunction with the fuelling rig causing a 17 second stop, enough to lose his advantage over both Irvine and Hakkinen, dropping back to fourth. Worse was to come!

With the field more or less static after the effect of the pitstops had worked through, Coulthard came in for his second stop on lap 56. This time the fuel filler wouldn't engage at all and 36 seconds later Ron Dennis waved the McLaren back onto the track, running on empty and having lost fourth to Villeneuve. He was back in next lap when Hakkinen's rig was used, but this only contained a small quantity of fuel and a further stop would be needed.

Coulthard rejoined seventh and immediately set off in pursuit of Alesi who had inherited sixth. Two laps later he was past the Sauber, and two laps after that passed Wurz to take fifth. Frustratingly though, Coulthard was back in the pits again on lap 66 for another attempt at refuelling. This time it was successful but he rejoined eighth behind Heinz-Harald Frentzen (who subsequently retired).

In the final laps, Schumacher was well clear and never looked in any danger of surrendering his commanding lead. Eddie Irvine's position was less secure, with Mika Hakkinen harassing him over the last fifteen laps. Despite a heroic effort from Hakkinen on the final corner, Irvine crossed the line a tenth of a second clear.

Villeneuve cruised in fourth, followed by Wurz who survived a late spin on oil for fifth. On the final lap Coulthard managed to overtake Alesi for the second time to gain a single point for sixth place. So, Coulthard gets the sympathy vote but that won't win the championship. Who would bet against Michael Schumacher or Ferrari now?



British Grand Prix, Silverstone, July 1998

It rained, so Michael Schumacher won! In fact the story of the British Grand Prix here at Silverstone was not quite that simple, but the atrocious weather conditions played their part and Schumacher finally emerged victorious from a race packed with drama and incident.

McLaren appeared to be back on song with Mika Hakkinen on pole position again, although team mate David Coulthard was over a second a lap behind and languishing in fourth place. He felt there had to be some problem with his car.



Ferrari were always going to be in the hunt with Schumacher second on the grid and Eddie Irvine fifth. The improved Williams pair completed the top six with Jacques Villeneuve in a season's best third and Heinz-Harald Frentzen sixth. Notably, Damon Hill lined up seventh for Jordan with a time only fractions of a second behind the three cars in front.

At the start of the race the track conditions were difficult to read, wet but drying, and most teams opted for intermediate tyres. Hakkinen, Schumacher and Coulthard got away well but Villeneuve had an awful start, dropping to fifth position. Jean Alesi, eighth on the grid, took advantage and jumped to fourth in the Sauber. Frentzen maintained sixth and Hill seventh, Irvine also getting a poor start and falling to tenth.

The intermediate tyres seemed to be working better on the McLarens than the Ferrari and Hakkinen began to open an early lead. Coulthard was right behind Schumacher and, in a brilliant overtaking manoeuvre, passed him on the fourth lap following an earlier error by the German. Coulthard quickly opened a gap of several seconds, although his team mate was a further five seconds ahead.

Eddie Irvine didn't seem too worried about his tyres and began to make up for his poor start, seemingly determined to entertain the Silverstone crowd with a one man show. By lap 8 he had worked his way up to Damon Hill's gearbox and promptly passed the Jordan. On the next lap, Villeneuve ran wide and Irvine was through to sixth place. Three laps later and it was Frentzen's turn to be bagged by the extrovert Irishman. Fifth to tenth and back again in twelve laps!

Meanwhile Damon Hill was finding the Jordan hard to handle in the wet conditions and duly spun out on lap 15, the first driver to retire in his home grand prix. Just Damon's luck! He was followed two laps later by Frentzen in similar circumstances.

By the time of the first pit stops on lap 20 the rain had begun again but most teams stuck with the intermediate tyres. Irvine gained another place in the pitlane, the Ferrari mechanics completing his stop two seconds quicker than Alesi's Sauber team! Irvine then continued his one man crusade by passing Alesi's team mate Johnny Herbert, who was on a one-stop strategy and was running fourth at the time.

The exception to the tyre choice was Mika Hakkinen, who took full wets on his lap 23 stop. At first, this seemed to be a bad choice as David Coulthard began eating into his lead and the gap was closed to just over a second by lap 27. However, as the rain became heavier the wisdom of Hakkinen's choice became more apparent, and he began to pull away again.



At this stage the two McLarens led, the two Ferraris followed and the two Saubers completed the top six. However, Johnny Herbert was reportedly asked to move over for team mate Alesi and, as he strayed off the racing line, the car spun in the wet and Herbert was out. If this was indeed as a result of team orders it was a strange decision!

This let Ralf Schumacher's Jordan into the top six following a superlative drive from the rainmeister's brother, who had been obliged to start from the back of the grid due to an infringement during qualifying. Unfortunately, at his second pit stop on lap 35 Ralf chose intermediate tyres, rather than wets, which would have seemed more prudent at this stage. Almost immediately the rain got worse still and Ralf was forced to stop again for wets five laps later.

Meanwhile, the track conditions finally caught David Coulthard out as he moved off line to pass some back markers on lap 37. The McLaren spun off and the championship appeared to drift out of reach at the same time. Poor David. Benetton were happy enough with the retirements :- Giancarlo Fisichella and Alexander Wurz, although a lap down, now inherited fifth and sixth places respectively, following poor qualifying performances but steady race drives.

By lap 43 Mika Hakkinen had a forty second advantage over Michael Schumacher, with Eddie Irvine and Jean Alesi some way behind that. However, in what were by now dreadful conditions, disaster almost struck the McLaren as it suddenly spun across the gravel, across the grass and, amazingly, back onto the track pointing in the right direction! A damaged front wing seemed a small price to pay, although it would prove crucial later.

With back markers spinning off everywhere the decision was made on lap 45 to bring out the safety car. The field closed up and Hakkinen's lead was reduced to only two seconds over Michael Schumacher. You could almost sense what was about to happen.

Sure enough, the safety car retired on lap 50 and a lap later Hakkinen was in the outfield again, blaming the damaged wing for loss of downforce, and letting Schumacher through into the lead. Not surprisingly the Ferrari moved away from the stricken McLaren, which began to come under pressure from Eddie Irvine until he too had a moment and backed off a little, content with another fine podium finish in third.

In the closing laps of the race Jean Alesi pulled into the pits from fourth and retired whilst the Benetton pair swapped positions, Wurz now taking fourth with Fisichella fifth. Ralf Schumacher was elevated back into the points positions, where he hung on to claim Jordan's first point of the season in sixth.

Just as we thought it was all done and dusted, news came through that Michael Schumacher had to serve a stop and go penalty. The offence was not obvious, possibly ignoring a yellow flag (although flags must have been difficult to see in the conditions), and there seemed some confusion over the procedure for issuing the penalty. Even more extraordinary was the method in which Schumacher elected to serve his punishment :- by entering his pits at the end of the final lap and effectively crossing the finish line immediately before serving the penalty.

Thus we had the confusing situation of not knowing exactly when the race finished (before the penalty or after?), Mika Hakkinen believing he had won, Michael Schumacher not sure whether he had or not, and the issue was only resolved in the short term when it was indeed Schumacher who took the top step on the

podium. This one will run and run however, as McLaren immediately lodged an appeal.

So plenty of drama, a bulldog-ish drive (by Irvine), a good argument to come and lousy weather. It couldn't be anything but the British Grand Prix!



Austrian Grand Prix, Spielberg, July 1998



It was like old times for McLaren at the A1 Ring in Spielberg, Austria, as Mika Hakkinen and David Coulthard chalked up the first one-two for the silver arrows since the Spanish Grand Prix in early May. However, this was not the front row to chequered flag domination we saw earlier in the season. Qualifying had turned into something of a lottery as torrential rain swept the circuit, and we had the most interesting looking grid so far.

Giancarlo Fisichella for Benetton and Jean Alesi for Sauber took advantage of a drying track in the final seconds of qualifying to snatch the first two places on the grid respectively.

This left Hakkinen in third alongside Michael Schumacher, together with the unexpected presence of Rubens Barrichello's Stewart and Mika Salo's Arrows on the third row. Eddie Irvine was back in eighth and, cruelly, David Coulthard - who had been fastest in dry practice - was back in fourteenth position.

However, race day was dry, hot and sunny and the McLaren / Ferrari axis was not about to let any interlopers spoil their party. Into the first corner Hakkinen leapt from third on the grid to lead Fisichella, with Schumacher and Barrichello both passing Alesi. It took only until the second corner for Schumacher to pass Fisichella also, with Eddie Irvine jumping to sixth, and the big names were back out in front.

Behind the leading pack chaos ensued. At the first corner several back markers collided and at the second the unfortunate Mika Salo, who had rapidly dropped from his exceptional grid position, was hit from behind by his team mate Pedro Diniz. As Salo spun his car in an attempt to rejoin he struck David Coulthard, who had more or less avoided the original incident, putting himself out of the race and Coulthard into the pits for repairs. However, the safety car was out by now and the field closed up, allowing Coulthard to rejoin last but still in touch.

When the safety car retired at the end of lap 3 Michael Schumacher began a concerted assault on Hakkinen's lead. He pushed too hard at one point and out braked himself, allowing Fisichella to regain second place momentarily. One lap later, Schumacher was through to second again and by lap 7 he was back on Hakkinen's gearbox.

Meanwhile, Rubens Barrichello, who was running fourth, pulled into the pits and out of the race with mechanical trouble and Eddie Irvine, on a charge, passed Alesi for fourth position. The retirement left Heinz-Harald Frentzen in sixth. David Coulthard was scything through the back markers and by lap 11 was 9th, with the Jordan pair of Ralf Schumacher and Damon Hill looking like little obstacle ahead.

Out in front, Hakkinen had defended his lead well against an agitated Schumacher, and the Ferrari began to drop back a little, having taken too much out of the tyres early on. On lap 19 the unprecedented happened - Schumacher made an unforced error! He ran wide, bounced over some lumpy looking grass mounds, and destroyed his front wing. Back in the pits even a 19 second repair job by his crew could only get him back on the track in sixteenth.



Frentzen was, by this time, entertaining the crowd with a wonderful display of pyrotechnics, as the Williams

Mecachrome engine let go in spectacular fashion. As the first pit stops began Hakkinen was comfortably leading Fisichella, with Irvine now in third and Coulthard up to fourth. Alesi was hanging on in fifth and Ralf Schumacher was running in sixth place.

On lap 22, as Fisichella left the pit lane, he found himself side by side with Jean Alesi. Neither was willing to give ground into the next corner and, as Alesi turned in, Fisichella kept his foot on the gas up the inside. The inevitable happened, the cars collided and both the front row grid runners were out of the race.

At this stage Coulthard was catching Irvine, but the latter avoided any scrap by pitting on lap 26, allowing the McLaren through into second. Irvine rejoined third with Ralf Schumacher now up to fourth. Meanwhile, it was Michael Schumacher's turn to rifle through the field. Tenth at this point and flying, by lap 36 he was up to fifth followed by Jacques Villeneuve, who was now in the points.

As further pit stop activity worked through the positions were unchanged, although Schumacher M was closing rapidly on Schumacher R. To the latter's credit, he was successful in holding off his elder brother for many laps but, after a prolonged battle, finally gave way on lap 56.

With Eddie Irvine the next man in front, albeit 15 seconds away, the smart money was on a third place finish for Schumacher. Sure enough, as Michael reeled off some of the fastest laps of the race, Irvine began to slow and, to nobody's surprise, his team mate passed him on lap 68. But surely team orders of this nature have been banned? Ah, but this wasn't team orders said Ferrari. This was a brake problem for Irvine!

So the two McLarens coasted home at the front, followed by the Ferrari pair, with the improving Ralf Schumacher in fifth and Villeneuve sixth. Damon Hill took seventh, having undertaken his qualifying runs in the worst weather and consequently starting fifteenth on the grid. Just Damon's luck! The championship is still wide open, but McLaren reaffirmed that they still have what it takes whilst Michael Schumacher reminded us that he is only human after all.



German Grand Prix, Hockenheim, August 1998

The German Grand Prix at Hockenheim confirmed that McLaren have reversed the tide that seemed to be flowing in Ferrari's favour, as Mika Hakkinen and David Coulthard secured their second one-two finish in eight days. Better still for the silver team, Michael Schumacher was off the pace all weekend and could only manage fifth. This time McLaren dominated from start to finish, as they had done earlier in the season, taking the first two places on the grid. However, Jacques Villeneuve put in a fighting performance during qualifying to take third spot only thousandths of a second behind Coulthard.



Jordan also found some form, with Ralf Schumacher recording an exceptional lap for fourth spot and Damon Hill in fifth. Eddie Irvine completed the top six on the grid, whilst Schumacher was back in an unaccustomed ninth place.

From the start, Villeneuve was slow away and was passed by both Jordans although he managed to re-pass Damon Hill almost straight away. Michael Schumacher jumped to seventh but was obviously struggling with the car and looked unlikely to trouble the leaders. Eddie Irvine, directly in front, was under greater threat and on lap four made a genuine error under braking which Schumacher took advantage of to steal sixth place.

Ralf Schumacher was hanging on to the McLaren pair in the early laps as the others began to drop back a little. However, it became apparent that he was running a low fuel load for a two stop strategy, whereas all the other front runners would only stop once. The strategy didn't work :- at his first stop on lap 15 he dropped from third to ninth and lost too much ground to be able to regain his earlier position as the others stopped.



Shortly before the pit stops David Coulthard put in a series of fast laps, including the fastest of the race, and closed the gap to Mika to fractions of a second. Although overtaking on the track seemed unlikely, a pit stop pass was a possibility. Hakkinen came in first but his crew did an excellent job, Coulthard followed the next lap but in his eagerness overshot his stopping point by a few feet and lost valuable time while his pit crew adjusted position. The chance was gone.

After the stops Villeneuve was still in third position with Ralf Schumacher now back up to fourth, although with a further stop still to make. Damon Hill followed in fifth and Michael Schumacher sixth. Giancarlo Fisichella took advantage of an on track error and a poor pit stop from Eddie Irvine to move into seventh.

As a spectacle the German Grand Prix failed to live up to some of the pre-race expectation generated by the unusual grid and the delicate balance of the championship. Apart from Ralf Schumacher losing ground during his second pit stop, during which he dropped to sixth, the leading positions remained unchanged for the rest of the race.

There was a hint of drama as Mika Hakkinen began to slow a little, apparently worried by excessive fuel consumption, and Jacques Villeneuve closed the gap on the McLarens. However, Villeneuve himself began to suffer drive problems and was forced to back off. Eddie Irvine made a brave attempt to entertain the

crowd with various moves on Fisichella, none of which came to anything except seeing Irvine off the track on several occasions.

In the end McLaren took a comfortable one-two, with less than a second separating the cars, and Villeneuve four seconds behind in third, his first podium finish for Williams this season. Jordan were extremely happy to see Damon Hill scoring his first points finish for the team in fourth, and Ralf Schumacher also in the points in sixth. Ferrari were less happy with Michael Schumacher's fifth and Irvine not scoring at all in eighth.

The tide may be back in McLaren's favour, but which way will the wind blow in Hungary? A very different track could see a very different result. This championship still has some way to run yet.



Hungarian Grand Prix, Hungaroring, August 1998



The Hungarian Grand Prix at the Hungaroring provided yet another twist in the championship tale as Michael Schumacher reversed his recent poor form to steal a tactically superb win. This race was always going to be more about strategy and mechanical reliability rather than pure racing, and so it proved, with McLaren contriving to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory on both counts.

The grid had looked set fair for another McLaren landslide, with the familiar pairing of Mika Hakkinen and David Coulthard occupying the front row.

Schumacher lurked ominously in third, however, alongside Damon Hill in the Jordan, who was enjoying his best qualifying position of the season at one of his favourite tracks. Eddie Irvine was fifth followed by the Williams pair of Jacques Villeneuve and Heinz-Harald Frentzen.

There were no surprises at the start, Irvine passing Hill but otherwise all were away in orderly fashion. Before long the leading three began to pull away from the rest of the field, Coulthard playing rear gunner to Hakkinen's title challenge and holding Schumacher at bay.

Eddie Irvine upped the pace a little and began to catch the leading group, causing speculation of a tactical battle to come but, on lap 14, he was suddenly into the pits and out of the race with a gearchange problem. Schuey was on his own.

The first pits stops for the front runners began on lap 26, with Damon Hill, who looked to be unlucky with traffic on rejoining. The others all followed, Schumacher having a quick stop indicating a light fuel load. He rejoined behind Jacques Villeneuve, who held out until lap 30 but had a particularly slow stop and just missed out on the chance to pass Hill. All was as before.

Schumacher, clear of Villeneuve, now began to charge and by lap 38 was breathing down Coulthard's neck once again. Incredibly, he was back in the pits on lap 41 for a second lightning stop. A three stop strategy seemed likely. Even more incredibly Coulthard followed the Ferrari in on the next lap, but took on a full fuel load. The delay handed track position, and second place, to Schumacher.

McLaren obviously felt that shooting itself in one foot wasn't sufficient, and almost immediately brought Hakkinen in for his second stop. Another full fuel load, another longer stop, and Schumacher was through to the lead. More remarkably, he was disappearing into the distance at between two and three seconds a lap quicker than the fuel heavy McLarens. By lap 50 he had a 9 second advantage.



Meanwhile, Damon Hill was coming under pressure from Jacques Villeneuve and lost fourth place just before his pit stop on lap 52. Both Williams and Jordan are at last beginning to get to grips with this season's cars. However, this would be Damon's worst position ever at the Hungaroring where he has always finished in the top two before, notably in last years dramatic drive in the Arrows.

Shortly after it all nearly came apart for Schumacher, as always right on the ragged edge with the skittish

Ferrari, as he slipped off the black top and took the country route. Unlike the drama in Austria, however, there were no obstacles and Schumacher caught the slide and rejoined without any visible damage to either the car or his lead.

This may be partly because Hakkinen was beginning to slow even more, with a suspected transmission problem, and he was obliged to let teammate Coulthard through to take up the somewhat hopeless chase. By lap 62 the lead was 27 seconds, plenty enough for Schumacher to take a careful third pitstop and emerge still well clear of Coulthard with new tyres to boot.

So Ferrari had won the strategic battle, now it was all down to reliability. Despite Irvine's earlier retirement this was won too, as Schumacher nursed his car round the remaining laps a comfortable distance ahead of Coulthard, whilst Hakkinen slipped further and further down the field. By lap 67 Villeneuve had caught and passed the ailing McLaren for third place, followed on lap 71 by Hill, who took fourth, and Frentzen, who took fifth. Hakkinen was left with the crumb of one championship point for sixth.

He may yet be grateful for that, of course, for this season looks like going right to the wire again. Schumacher back on form again and only seven points behind with four races to go. The scene is set.



Belgian Grand Prix, Spa, August 1998

He's done it! Finally, Damon Hill broke the run of misfortune which seems to have dogged him for the last two years to claim Jordan's first ever Grand Prix victory at Spa, followed home by team mate Ralf Schumacher for an historic one-two. At times the Belgian Grand Prix seemed more like a destruction derby as appalling weather and poor visibility took their toll, not to mention a headline grabbing display of bad temper from Schumacher Snr., but Damon kept his head to record his 22nd Grand Prix win.



On the grid, it was the usual McLaren pair on the front row with Mika Hakkinen once again leading David Coulthard. There was a hint of what was to come with Damon Hill snatching third ahead of the Ferrari duo, arch-rival Michael Schumacher fourth and Eddie Irvine in fifth. Completing the top six was Jacques Villeneuve's Williams.

Race day brought patchy rain though, and the smart money quickly switched to Schumacher. Tyre choice is often crucial in this situation, and as the cars lined up it became apparent that most were on wets whilst the Ferrari had opted for intermediates.

We never found out if this was a race-winning strategy though because the first attempt to start the race ended in spectacular failure. Eddie Irvine made a lightning start but, as he tried to pass Coulthard, there is a suspicion that the cars touched and suddenly the McLaren was out of control, veering into the barriers to the right and spinning back across the track.

Other drivers tried to take avoiding action but, with limited visibility and a slippery surface, there was little to be done. With cars spinning, piling into each other, bits of debris flying around the track and general carnage ensuing the race was immediately red-flagged. In all, thirteen drivers were involved in the pile up of which four would not take the restart, although fortunately none were seriously injured.

In the prolonged delay before the restart most other teams switched to intermediates. This time luck was with Damon Hill, who had made an awful start at the first attempt, as he was able to take advantage of poor getaways by both the McLarens to jump into the lead at the first corner.

Schumacher also passed Coulthard and tried to drive round the outside of Hakkinen too. Once again there was the suspicion of contact, once again a McLaren was set spinning. As Hakkinen tried to point his car in the right direction he was collected by an unsighted Johnny Herbert, and both were out of the race. We waited for another red flag, but it didn't come. The race was on.

Out of all the confusion Eddie Irvine emerged in second place with Schumacher behind, Jean Alesi in the Sauber sneaked up the inside line from tenth on the grid into fourth, Villeneuve took fifth and Coulthard was relegated to sixth. Schumacher quickly passed Irvine but Coulthard was just as quickly in the wars again. There was a tangle with Alexander Wurz and both cars were off into the gravel, although the McLaren did manage to rejoin fifteenth and last.



Meanwhile, the safety car came out to allow Hakkinen's wreck to be cleared and Heinz-Harald Frentzen in the second Williams inherited the vacant sixth position. The race restarted again on lap 3, with Villeneuve passing Alesi into the first corner and Frentzen following later in the lap. Two laps later Villeneuve spun and dropped down to sixth place.

Hill and Schumacher began to pull clear of the rest of the field by as much as three seconds a lap at this stage, trading fastest laps. However, as the rain increased the gap between the two decreased until finally, on lap 9, Damon had to let the quicker Ferrari through and Schumacher rapidly opened up a big gap. With Hakkinen out, Schumacher would now lead the championship if he could hold his lead. Who would have bet against it?

By lap 10 the track was getting very slippery again and suddenly Irvine skated off. After stopping for wet tyres he rejoined 11th. Ralf Schumacher in the second Jordan gained sixth but, almost immediately, he also made an early first pitstop for wets. It was now the Benetton of Giancarlo Fisichella in sixth in what was a rapidly changing order! Two laps later, Frentzen was momentarily off allowing Alesi through into third.

The main pitstops began on lap 16, with the leaders following each other in and switching to full wets. Ralf Schumacher's early stop now paid dividends as he moved up the order to third and Alesi dropped to fourth. Shortly after stopping, Villeneuve spun on the new tyres and was out of the race leaving Frentzen in fifth and Irvine, also benefitting from his earlier stop, back up to sixth.

By lap 25 Michael Schumacher had built up a 30 second advantage and looked unassailable. However, fate moves in strange ways and suddenly the impossible happened. As Schumacher caught the struggling Coulthard to lap him, he drove straight into the McLaren's back wheel, losing his own front wheel in the process.

Was he unsuspected by the spray? Did he make a misjudgment? Nobody knows for sure, but as both cars limped back to the pits Schumacher's view seemed to be that Coulthard had deliberately slowed, forcing the accident. The German strode haughtily down the pitlane to berate the hapless Coulthard in the McLaren garage, accusing him of trying to kill him. However, telemetry afterwards showed Coulthard to be innocent and so the explanation remains a mystery.

Nevertheless, although Coulthard managed to rejoin five laps down (which was probably the last thing he needed after his afternoon so far), Schumacher was out of the race and the championship lead was still tantalisingly out of reach. To complete a miserable day for Ferrari, Eddie Irvine spun into the gravel and retired on the same lap.

So we now had the unprecedented sight of two Jordans leading a race, with Alesi third, Frentzen fourth, Fisichella fifth and Pedro Diniz, in the Arrows, up to sixth (albeit a lap down). But still the drama was not done as on lap 28, in a carbon copy of the Schumacher incident, Fisichella drove (unsighted) into the back of Shinji Nakano's tail end Minardi. This was a nasty accident, the Benetton losing both front wheels, sliding into the pitlane barrier and bursting into flames.

Fisichella leapt out unhurt as the safety car once more was called into action. Most teams took advantage to make their second pitstops, but the field closed up behind Hill. Diniz now had fifth place and sixth spot was occupied by Jarno Trulli in the Prost, although there were in fact only eight cars left, including the McLaren

and subsequently repaired Minardi both five laps down.

Over the final eleven laps, after the safety car retired, we must assume that Jordan exercised team orders. Schumacher Jr. looked as if he could go quicker than Damon but nobody wanted a repeat of the incident last year when Ralf took out his team mate in an overtaking manoeuvre, and in these conditions prudence was called for. The only irritation was Jean Alesi, who began to give Ralf a hard time as the rain eased off. However, five laps from home the rain started again and the Jordans once more pulled away from the Sauber with no further change in order.

Better luck for Damon and Jordan then although, with the exception of Michael Schumacher's self-destruct, Hill was deservedly ahead of the trouble. No change in the championship race at all though, except the passing of one more points scoring opportunity. And Schumacher refusing to take any blame for an accident, so no change there either.



Italian Grand Prix, Monza, September 1998



It was hard to imagine who was happier at the end of the Italian Grand Prix in Monza. The Italian tifosi, who saw their revered Ferrari team score a home one-two for the first time in many years? Michael Schumacher, who moved level on points with Mika Hakkinen in the championship race after another astonishing victory? Or Bernie Ecclestone, who must have been rubbing his hands in glee at the cliffhanger end to the season now in prospect? It was definitely not Ron Dennis, whose McLaren team now seems to be on the back foot with two races to go. The silver arrows will have to dig very deep to upset the Ferrari bandwagon, although you wouldn't rule any twist out of this tale.

The signs were not good for McLaren. Difficult conditions in qualifying saw Schumacher and Jacques Villeneuve in the Williams take the front row spots which have almost been McLaren's of right this year. Mika Hakkinen and David Coulthard had to be content with the second row whilst the second Ferrari of Eddie Irvine was fifth and Ralf Schumacher's Jordan sixth. Ralf's team mate and Spa winner Damon Hill came down to earth with a bump :- he was fourteenth.

However, Schumacher got a terrible start. He dived right to try to prevent Hakkinen squeezing through the gap but, fortunately, Villeneuve also moved right to let the determined Finn through or else we could have been looking at another multiple pile-up. In the confusion Coulthard slipped through into second, Irvine went round the outside of his leader for third and Villeneuve recovered for fourth.

Schumacher was unexpectedly back in fifth, which was not part of his game plan at all. Within a few corners he had re-passed Villeneuve whilst on the second lap the unfortunate Irvine was obliged to let him through to pursue the fleeing McLarens.

Meanwhile Ralf Schumacher was in hot pursuit of Jean Alesi in the Sauber, who had passed him from eighth on the grid for sixth at the start, and Ralf soon managed to reclaim his position. Moving even quicker was Damon Hill, assisted by the low fuel weight of a two stop strategy, who rapidly passed all comers and by lap 5 also overtook Alesi for seventh place.

On lap 7 Hakkinen let Coulthard through, and he quickly opened up a two second gap, suggesting the Scot was running a low fuel load. Two laps later, Ralf Schumacher did a similar favour for Hill, and by lap 14 Damon had caught and passed Villeneuve for fifth.

The weakness of the two stop strategy became apparent shortly afterwards, however, when Damon made his first stop and immediately dropped back to thirteenth. Worse, he was stuck in midfield traffic without the speed advantage he had enjoyed previously.

We never found out if Coulthard would fare better because, on lap 17, we saw the defining moment of the race and possibly the season. Coulthard's engine let go in a cloud of smoke, Hakkinen eased up slightly in the poor visibility and Schumacher pounced. Hakkinen realised too late, tried to defend his line but ran too wide and Schumacher was through.



The wily German immediately built up a five second advantage as he scythed his way through the back markers. Irvine now inherited third, although he was some way behind, and he was followed by Villeneuve,

Ralf Schumacher and Alesi. The main pitstops took place between laps 32 and 35 without incident although Damon Hill began to move up the order again and, by the time he had made his second stop, had improved to seventh.

Jacques Villeneuve, in his efforts to force the reluctant Williams to run with the best, overcooked it on lap 40 and, not for the first time this year, ended up spinning into the gravel and out of the race. Meanwhile, at the front Hakkinen began to increase his pace and knock a few tenths off Schumacher's lead until, with eight laps to go it was down to three seconds.

Unfortunately, just as we were looking forward to a title-deciding scrap, the McLaren developed a braking problem sending Hakkinen into a dramatic and unexpected spin over the grass and gravel. Incredibly, Mika managed to keep his sense of direction, avoid stalling the engine, select reverse gear and make it back onto the track just 22 seconds behind Schumacher and still 12 clear of Irvine. However, although his skills deserved better, the McLaren was now wounded and could only limp round the final laps 4 or 5 seconds off the pace.

It must have been agony for Mika to watch precious points disappear as first Irvine caught and passed him for second and then, one lap from home, Ralf Schumacher took third for a podium celebration with his brother. Hakkinen held fourth from Alesi, who was too far behind in fifth, and Hill completed the points scorers in sixth.

So the championship is balanced between Schumacher and Hakkinen at 80 points apiece, something which would have seemed unthinkable during McLaren's early season domination. The McLaren machinery is now looking increasingly fragile while Ferrari seem to have engineered exceptional reliability. The last two races will be a trial of mental strength for both drivers and teams.



Luxembourg Grand Prix, Nurburgring, Germany, Sept. 1998

Ferrari have taken the fight to McLaren recently, with better reliability, better strategy and, in Michael Schumacher, a better driver. So when the two Ferraris gained the front row of the grid at the Nurburgring in Germany, for the Luxembourg Grand Prix, the result seemed an almost foregone conclusion.

But what did we get in this topsy-turvy season? Why, a McLaren victory of course! Mika Hakkinen, in what is already being called the best race of his life, had the better strategy and outdrove Michael Schumacher in a wheel to wheel battle to take the flag.

Things had not looked promising for McLaren when Schumacher and Eddie Irvine grabbed the top two places in qualifying. Hakkinen and David Coulthard could only manage third and fifth, separated by the Benetton of Giancarlo Fisichella in fourth. Ralf Schumacher completed the top six in the Jordan.



The start gave no inkling of what was to come either. There was no repeat of Monza and the front of the grid got away well, Irvine best of all as he led into the first corner followed by Schumacher. Hakkinen retained third and Coulthard moved up to fourth, with Fisichella fifth and the second Benetton of Alexander Wurz rising to sixth from eighth on the grid.

Schumacher soon passed Irvine for the lead at the end of the first lap, apparently because Irvine got out of shape rather than through team orders. Schumacher quickly built up a five second lead and, although Irvine presented a barrier to third placed Hakkinen, the McLaren driver didn't appear to be able to do much about it at this stage.

However, as the race progressed Hakkinen's pace began to improve and Irvine started to come under pressure, making a few small mistakes here and there until the McLaren finally made it past on lap 14. This was a wonderful overtaking manoeuvre:- clean, decisive and brave in the circumstances. Had Irvine turned in (a la Schumacher at Jerez) both cars could have been out, so acknowledgement is due to Eddie for his sportsmanship.

Hakkinen was now eight seconds behind Schumacher but began to set a series of fastest laps, slowly eating into the Ferrari's lead. There was a suspicion that the Goodyear tyres were not working too well as the Bridgestone shod Coulthard, Fisichella and Wurz also closed up behind Irvine.

Schumacher came in early for his first pitstop on lap 23, but Hakkinen kept out on the circuit, reeling out fast times until lap 28 when he also stopped. Quick work by his crew saw him make it out just in front of Schumacher. There was a bit of a dice but Mika proved his strength and held off the Ferrari, ironically the successful pitstop strategy and the aggressive driving style coming straight out of the Schumacher text book.



What's more Irvine, who pitted just after Schumacher, became stuck behind Jacques Villeneuve on rejoining allowing Coulthard, who didn't stop until lap 29, to open up a sufficient gap to gain third place. A comprehensive strategic success for McLaren!

Meanwhile, both Benettons had appalling pitstops allowing Heinz-Harald Frentzen to move up to fifth place in the Williams.

Fisichella battled with Frentzen for several laps and finally made a move stick on lap 37, only to hit oil shortly afterwards and spin off, dropping to seventh behind his teammate Wurz.

In front, Hakkinen was building a slight advantage as the Ferrari began to look a little ragged. This had grown to almost 3 seconds by the time of Schumacher's second stop on lap 47. Mika Hakkinen followed in on lap 48 and, with an almost identical stop time, emerged comfortably ahead of the Ferrari.

Others didn't have it so easy. Frentzen, Wurz and back marker Mika Salo in the Arrows all came in for their second stops at the same time. As Frentzen left his bay, Salo pulled out immediately in front forcing the Williams man to dive around the Arrows. Wurz was held up by all this and rejoined behind Fisichella, who had stopped the previous lap.

However, the biggest winner was Ralf Schumacher in the Jordan who had been running in eighth behind the Williams / Benetton train, but who now moved through to fifth. This didn't last long though :- lap 54 saw Schumacher Jr off into the gravel and touring out with a puncture, although whether this was the cause or the result of the off wasn't clear.

All the leading cars were now back where they were 15 laps previously. Hakkinen was still heading Schumacher, who was beginning to drift away from the McLaren as they threaded through traffic, whilst Coulthard was some way off in third. Irvine was further behind in fourth and began to come under some pressure from Frentzen in fifth and Fisichella in sixth.

Damon Hill, having made much progress in the Jordan recently, was suffering from a heavy cold and never made it out of the midfield. Qualifying tenth and finishing a lapped ninth this was another race to forget.

There were no more changes in position and Mika Hakkinen, who slowed towards the end, came home with a two second advantage in front of the disbelieving German fans. Although Hakkinen was immediately installed as title favourite he and McLaren are the last ones likely to be counting their chickens. There is now a five week gap to the final Grand Prix in Japan, and the one thing this season has taught us so far is to expect the unexpected!



Japanese Grand Prix, Suzuka, November 1998



Mika Hakkinen clinched the 1998 drivers championship, together with the constructors title for McLaren, with a superb victory at Suzuka in the Japanese Grand Prix. It looked as though we were to witness a thrilling battle between the two title contenders, with Michael Schumacher grabbing pole position and Hakkinen just fractions behind in qualifying.

Nobody else was close, there was over a second gap to David Coulthard's McLaren in third and Eddie Irvine's Ferrari in fourth.

Bizarrely, a good portion of the remainder of the grid lined up in teams. The Williams of Heinz-Harald Frentzen and Jacques Villeneuve were followed by the Jordan, Benetton, Sauber and Prost pairs.

However, in the event the race was something of an anti-climax as Schumacher's car stalled on the grid, forcing him to start from the back of the field. There had already been an aborted start, when Jarno Trulli's Prost stalled, but as Schumacher engaged first gear for the restart the engine cut and his title ambitions were effectively over.

Nevertheless, in typical Schumacher style he gave it a shot. As Mika Hakkinen led away, Irvine jumped to second followed by Frentzen, Coulthard, Villeneuve and Damon Hill in the Jordan, who had been eighth on the grid. Schumacher meanwhile blitzed through the field up to twelfth on the first lap, tenth by lap two and passed his brother Ralf for seventh place on lap 5.

At this point he was only 12 seconds behind Hakkinen, but things started to get tougher. As Hakkinen and Irvine began to pull away from the rest of the field Schumacher got stuck behind the battling duo of Villeneuve and Hill and could find no way through. Hakkinen took advantage and disappeared into the distance.

The first pitstops started on lap 14 when Hill came in and Schumacher took the opportunity to pass Villeneuve and close on Coulthard, who in turn was stuck behind Frentzen. Schumacher himself came in on lap 16, made an extremely quick stop and managed to get out again in front of Hill.

Hill made the place up again as Villeneuve suffered from a slow stop, as did his teammate Frentzen on lap 20. Coulthard had been stuck behind Frentzen but now managed to get out in front on lap 21, but astonishingly it was Schumacher who pounced and passed the whole train of cars, emerging in third position from seventh purely through pitstop speed and strategy.



Although Schumacher was now 28 seconds behind Hakkinen there was still a glimmer of hope. Any mechanical failure or driver error by the Finn would leave the German with only his ever obliging teammate Irvine to pass for victory, and what a story that would have made. However, in the event it was Schumacher who suffered more misfortune, this time running over the debris of a tail-ender collision and blowing his rear tyre. His race against the odds, and his season long battle, were finally over.

The news must have reached Hakkinen but he kept driving flawlessly, opening up a gap of 24 seconds over Irvine before easing up towards the end. Meanwhile, David Coulthard had inherited third with Frentzen now

fourth, closely followed by Hill in fifth and Villeneuve sixth.

After the second stops attention focused on the battle for fourth place with Damon Hill, in his 100th Grand Prix, constantly pressurising Frentzen and, in turn, coming under some pressure himself from Villeneuve. At the last chicane on the final lap, Hill managed to dive past the Williams and clinch fourth place for Jordan in the constructors championship, behind McLaren, Ferrari and Williams.

This has been an extraordinary season and Mika Hakkinen richly deserves his first world championship, just reward for McLaren's exceptional car this year and a series of precise, composed and extremely quick drives. Schumacher has played the villain, pulling no punches and barging his Ferrari into contention against superior opposition with guile, tenaciousness and sheer guts. However, it was a fitting end to the season that the first man to congratulate Mika Hakkinen on his return to the paddock was none other than Michael Schumacher.

