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As the championship moves towards its climax, qualifying for the 56-lap Chinese Grand Prix was always going to be a critical session for the three championship hopefuls. After dominating practice at the 5.451km Shanghai International Circuit, it was championship leader Lewis Hamilton who got the job done to claim that all-important pole position.

Hamilton's first run left him fifth on the grid after an error at turn eight, so it was his final tour that vaulted him to the head of the timesheets on a 1:36.303s, three-tenths clear of Kimi Raikkonen who found a turn of speed in the final round of qualifying in his Ferrari.

As Hamilton celebrates his 13th career pole, Felipe Massa looks ahead to the penultimate round of the championship from third position on the grid, a full half second behind Hamilton. Strategy, as ever, can still play a hand on race day as can the weather which is currently predicted to be unsettled on Sunday afternoon.

Fernando Alonso, chasing his third straight Grand Prix win, qualified his Renault in a fine fourth position. The former champion this week declared that he will do what he can to try and help Massa's championship chances, so Hamilton has three very serious rivals in his rear view mirror.

Heikki Kovalainen's task this weekend is to try and help his McLaren Mercedes team-mate. A locked brake heading into turn 14 ruined his final qualifying effort and the Finn lines up a disappointing fifth and seemingly unable to provide that much needed support enjoyed over at rivals Ferrari.

A fast start from the Finn can change all that, but McLaren will be disappointed with his qualifying form.

Mark Webber put in a great effort to record the sixth best time in qualifying, but the engine change following the practice failure hands the Australian a ten position grid penalty and he will therefore start down in 16th position, other potential penalties aside... It will be a massive disappointment for the Red Bull Renault team who are trying to close the gap on rivals Toro Rosso Ferrari who have both Sebastian Vettel and Sebastien Bourdais starting once again both in the top ten.

After showing well in the Saturday morning practice session, it would all go downhill for the BMW Sauber team when it really counted. Nick Heidfeld starts the race from sixth position after a solid run but qualifying was a disaster for Robert Kubica. Still mathematically a championship contender, the Pole struggled in the first round of qualifying before finally scraping through in 14th position. The second round of qualifying saw the Canadian Grand Prix winner just 12th of the 15 runners and eliminated from further qualifying action. With Webber taking a grid position penalty, Kubica lines up 11th and has it all to do.

Toro Rosso continues to shine in the final stages of the season with Vettel getting the jump on Bourdais in this session. Vettel will line up seventh ahead of the leading Toyota of Jarno Trulli and then team-mate Bourdais.

Nelson Piquet failed to make the final round of qualifying in the second Renault and will be disappointed to see that he retains the mantle of being the only driver in the series who has not out-qualified his team-mate at some point during the season. In fairness to Piquet, his team-mate is rather stronger than many in the field and the Brazilian will be looking to add to Renault's impressive tally of late season points tomorrow afternoon.

Timo Glock has not had the pace of Toyota team-mate Trulli all weekend and starts the Chinese Grand Prix from 12th position ahead of Rubens Barrichello who put in a great effort to drag the Honda into the second round of qualifying. Barrichello, who has no deal in place yet for next season, was once again the more competitive of the Honda drivers with Jenson Button way back in 18th position.

It was another tough day for the Williams Toyota team with Nico Rosberg set to start from 14th position and Kazuki Nakajima way back in 17th. David Coulthard, unhappy with the antics of Heidfeld in the second round of qualifying, starts 15th ahead of the ever-unlucky Webber in the second Red Bull Renault. At the back, the Force India Ferrari duo of Adrian Sutil and Giancarlo Fisichella proved to be very closely matched with just nine-thousandths of a second between them. Sadly for the Silverstone-based team they were seven-tenths slower than any other competitor.

It is advantage Hamilton ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix and all eyes will be on the skies to see if the predicted rain does materialise on race day to add yet another twist to a quite extraordinary season.

Source- F1-Live

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