

Mexico City 29 October 2016.

'THIS YEAR TOP SPEEDS SHOULD BE EVEN QUICKER'

That was Pirelli motorsport director Paul Hembery predicting that this weekend would see last year's top speed of 366.4 km/h at the Autódromo Hermanos Rodríguez eclipsed as new tyre regulations and other factors come into play.

And he was right: the Friday practice sessions were several seconds faster than in 2015, Valtteri Bottas was clocked at 366 km/h in his Williams in the very first session, and we have yet to see the full impact of the new-to-Mexico Pirelli Supersoft compounds.

It is almost exactly 30 years since Gerhard Berger famously won the Mexican Grand Prix for Benetton by going through the entire 68-lap race on one set of Pirelli tyres. That won't happen this year, for several reasons.

All 22 drivers have three compounds to choose from: the white-striped Medium, yellow Soft and the red Supersoft which Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel used to set the fastest time on Friday afternoon.

Among their 13 sets of tyres, each driver will be required to use at least one set of the Mediums and the Softs in the 71-lap race, while the Supersofts must be used at some stage by the ten men who make it through to the third and final segment of qualifying on Saturday.

We know in advance which tyres each driver has chosen over the Mexican weekend: Pirelli publishes the information ahead of each race. Championship leader Nico Rosberg has opted for four sets of Mediums, five of Softs and five Supersofts.

On the other hand, Mexican favourite Esteban Gutiérrez has just one set of Mediums, five of Softs and seven of the compound that should be quick – Supersofts. They may make the car go fast – but how long will they last?

That question will dominate strategic thinking ahead of the race as teams try to balance speed against durability and get their pit stop timing right. Last year Rosberg two-stopped on his way to victory, on laps 26 and 46 – but Mexico's other driver Sergio Pérez took the bold gamble of one-stopping.

Famous for his skill in managing his tyres, Checo started on used Softs then ran no fewer than 53 laps on one new set of Mediums and was still able to secure a fighting eighth place in his Force India. This year Pérez asked for three sets each of Mediums and Softs and, like Gutiérrez, seven sets of Supersofts.

Another Latin-American driver, Felipe Massa, admitted that the tyre question loomed very large on Friday. "It was very difficult to understand the tyres today," said the Williams driver who is retiring at the end of the season. "The track is just very low grip, but it's improving every time we go out. You can go out and have no grip, but then suddenly at the end of the run the grip improves. So, I think understanding the tyres this weekend will be very important for the result at the end of the race. I wasn't happy with the result on the new tyres, but I was happy on the longer runs. We just need to work on understanding everything."

To end on a lighter note, as we are in Mexico the Renault Sport F1 team has come up with an easy way to get to grips, so to speak, with the whole tyre situation. Mediums are fajitas – good

all-rounders that can be as spicy or as mild as you want; Softs are enchiladas – gooey in the middle with a semi-hard surface; and the Supersofts are nachos – they give a good hit of flavour but don't last long! Which would you choose?

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