

McLaren punished at Malaysian GP

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McLaren duo Lewis Hamilton and Heikki Kovalainen have been penalised five grid places for impeding rivals during qualifying at the Malaysian Grand Prix. Hamilton has been doing this for a while, this is the first time he is penalized for it.

The pair had been on the second row but Hamilton will now start in ninth, one place behind his Finnish team-mate.

After qualifying they were summoned by the stewards to answer complaints they held others up in the last session.

They ruled Kovalainen blocked Renault driver Fernando Alonso and Hamilton had obstructed BMW Sauber's Nick Heidfeld.

The FIA said Hamilton was "travelling at a very slow speed on the racing line", while Kovalainen was also charged with committing the same offence against Alonso.

Hamilton and Kovalainen had completed their fast laps and were slowing down to conserve fuel.

But Heidfeld complained their actions had cost him vital seconds in the final qualifying session, when 10 drivers go all out for the top grid positions.

"Both of the McLarens were in front at turn four, in the middle of the racing line.

"I just couldn't drive on the line that I wanted and, even more importantly, I could not brake where I wanted to.

"If you look at the times, they were very, very close - I lost two tenths and I think that would have put me third."

Hamilton felt he was not at fault, although did apologise to Heidfeld.

"I was pretty much out of the way," he said after emerging from the stewards' meeting. "If I held him up then I apologise for that."

Alonso, who left McLaren after a turbulent season to rejoin Renault, also felt he was denied a quick lap by the McLarens.

"I could have done better in Q3 this afternoon as I was with Heidfeld on a fast lap while the others were going slowly, and that affected me a bit, which is a shame," the double world champion said.

However, the McLaren team defended their drivers and insisted they had done all they could to make sure their rivals were able to cleanly complete their flying laps.

"There was clearly an issue there and it's unfortunate," chief executive Martin Whitmarsh said.

"If you look at the footage, our guys squeezed in as much as they could and slowed and we don't think they impaired Nick.

"I can understand his view that having all of those cars around when you're trying to concentrate on a quick lap isn't ideal."

McLaren accepted their punishment and said in a statement: "We accept the stewards' decision but would like to add that neither Lewis nor Heikki impaired any of their competitors deliberately."

Heidfeld was still not happy to accept their explanation and said: "If they did the best that they could do, they didn't do very well.

"I was approaching my last lap on the option tyre and it would have been my quickest lap if not for the McLarens driving in the middle of the racing line at 80kph."