



F1 Digest 2009 – Germany Qualifying

Welcome to F1 Digest 2009 – Germany Qualifying.

Free Practice was full of interesting things to note, but which would carry forward to Qualifying?

Free Practice 3

Saturday dawned dry, if a little overcast. And when I say a little, I mean a lot. The track temperature was at 20 degrees C and the air at 12. All the cars were out straight away, with only Rubens remaining in the garage whilst the installation laps were completed.

Massa was the first to go for a proper lap, 15 minutes into the session, but his time was soon topped by Glock. Button slipped into second, and Sutil made his way up to third. Button overtook Glock for P1, but Lewis Hamilton soon took the top spot. All the new parts on his McLaren were working a treat. Kovalainen, who has none of the updates was yet to set a time, and Barrichello was still sitting the session out.

Halfway through, and the Brawn team finally got him ready to go. Barrichello was in the car, and had apparently suffered a sensor problem making him miss 30 minutes or so. A lot of the cars were struggling to get heat in the tyres, Raikkonen ran wide, as did Button, whilst Kubica put in a really rough lap.

With ten minutes to go, just Massa, Button and Kubica were out on track – the BMW team admitting that they are just slow and they don't know why. With three minutes to go, everyone was out of the pits, Raikkonen was putting in some fast times in second, with Hamilton remaining on top. Massa overtook his teammate to slip into second, and Alonso popped up there as well. He had a last minute spin, just for effect, too.

Results

Hamilton topped another Free Practice timesheet, then, with a 1:31.121, followed by Alonso and Massa, and then two Red Bulls. Vettel was ahead of Webber by about five hundredths of a second. Raikkonen was up in sixth, with Trulli, Rosberg and Nakajima behind him. Heidfeld was the best placed BMW in tenth with a 1:31.928.

Button was the first man to drop into the 1:32s, followed by Glock, Sutil and Barrichello – who was the first to fall a second behind the fastest time. In 15th place, Fisichella, with Piquet and Buemi behind him. Kubica finished the morning 18th, three tenths of Heidfeld's time. Finally, Kovalainen and Bourdais rounded out the pack.

Qualifying

Quali 1 got underway and the track temperature was at 22 degrees C and the air at 14. Vettel was out first, but everyone piled out for a lap time almost straight away. Button set the early benchmark, beaten by Alonso, but the Brawn driver took the place back, then they were all beaten by Hamilton. The two Ferraris were also doing pretty well up in 4th and 5th.

Vettel popped up to P1, just four hundredths faster than Lewis. Following their good performance in Free Practice, Force India were 13th and 18th, whilst the two Toro Rossos were plum at the back. Halfway through, the top four returned to the pit lane to regroup, which allowed Webber to take the top spot. Glock had a bit of a wobble which put him right in the path of a following Alonso, who had to slow up. He still managed to slip into second though. Glock was stuck back in 19th, after running wide again on his next lap as well.



It started to rain, which meant that the lap times were not improving at all – the top ten all remained in the garage with three minutes still to go. Glock was sent out again, but he couldn't improve on his own time, let alone move up the order. He gave up his lap, and returned to the pit lane, just in time for the chequered flag.

The fastest three in quali 1 were: Webber, Alonso and Vettel, whilst we lost Kubica, Buemi, Fisichella, Glock and Bourdais.

The second session got underway, with all the cars lined up waiting for the lights to go green. The traffic on that first lap was amazing to see, with all the drivers heading out tentatively.

Nakajima slid off, and coming towards him Kovalainen was running wide as well. Luckily, he and the other cars managed to make the corner, and avoided any disaster. Massa also ran wide and couldn't keep control over the grass. Thankfully, he regained the back of the pack, and all the cars returned to the pitlane for wet tyres. Webber continued on though, with the soft tyres on.

Heikki crashed and hit the wall, but made it back to the pitlane. It didn't look like there was too much damage. Barrichello was still to come out at the halfway point, but he eventually took to the track. Webber and Vettel were topping the timesheets, in that order.

In the pitlane, Heikki's mechanics were putting wet tyres on his car, but then they changed their mind and took them off again. Tyre indecision! Many of the other drivers returned to the pitlane, putting on their soft tyres. Barrichello, who had chosen the soft tyres in the first place, rather than the wets, was clearly enjoying much better grip than the others. He dived past his teammate and breezed by Nakajima as well. He popped up into P1, easily. Then it started raining again.

Sutil was in tenth, and rocked up to P2, just before the track got too slippery. Alonso spun at the chicane, but continued onwards, as Raikkonen also ran wide over the gravel.

It looked like the moment had passed, Kovalainen and Button were in the bottom five and ready to drop out. Kovalainen hauled himself up to sixth, which bumped Hamilton into the drop out zone, but he then pulled himself up to sixth as well. Button jumped up to fifth. The moment hadn't passed as much as we originally thought.

When the session was over, the top three were – Barrichello, Piquet and Sutil. That's just weird. Dropping out – Heidfeld, Alonso, Nakajima, Trulli and Rosberg.

The third and final session got underway with the track mostly dry, and no rain expected for a good five minutes. No one seemed in a rush to hit the track, with Button the first one out, followed by his teammate.

Barrichello was the fastest man on the first run, with teammate Button pulling in and abandoning his first lap. Vettel and Webber followed, with both Ferrari's behind. Hamilton also aborted his first lap run as well. Sutil was up into fifth, ahead of Massa.

Button headed out for another attempt at a lap, and set the fastest first sector of the session, but was still warming up his tyres. Sutil improved up to fourth. With just a couple of minutes to go, Hamilton still hadn't set a time, whilst Kovalainen was up to fourth. Hamilton popped up to provisional pole and Button could only slot in behind him in second.

On the final run, Webber jumped up to P1, and two Brawns tried to take it off him, although Button could only manage second, before Barrichello pushed him down to third.



Results

The final top ten sees Webber on pole with Barrichello lining up beside him on the grid. Button is third with Vettel in fourth. The two McLarens are together, Hamilton ahead of Kovalainen. Sutil finished up in seventh, with Massa and Raikkonen behind him, and Piquet rounding out the top ten.

The others line up, in order, as Heidfeld, Alonso, Nakajima, Trulli, then Rosberg in 15th, Kubica 16th, Buemi, Fisichella, Glock and Bourdais.

Adjustments

After qualifying, the FIA confirmed that Timo Glock was given a three place penalty, for the incident with Alonso – where he ran off the track, and regained the it in front of the Renault, thus impeding him. The stewards deemed this was a potentially dangerous move as well, so they handed out the penalty. Glock only qualified 19th, so will start from the back of the grid, and could potentially choose to start from the pitlane.

It's also worth noting that the FIA fined Red Bull for an incident in the pitlane, where Vettel was let out into the path of Nakajima, and they investigated something between Massa and Sutil – we're not sure what – but it can't have been that important because they decided not to penalise anyone.

Fuel Loads

At the front, Webber did an amazing job on a relatively heavy fuel load. He and Vettel measured the same weight but Vettel only came in fourth. In between them, the two Brawn cars are lighter, with Button the lightest of the entire four.

Of the two McLarens in sixth and seventh, Heikki is heavier than Lewis and just behind him, which is pretty impressive given how loaded up with new parts Hamilton's car is. Although, I say just behind him, there was an entire second between the two.

Sutil finished ahead of two Ferraris and a Renault, despite having the heaviest fuel load of the top ten, so a great lap for him.

In the rest of the field, Rosberg is the heaviest out there, with Bourdais close behind him. Glock and Fisichella are pretty light towards the back, perhaps hoping the weather and a mix-up of strategies will play into their hands.

Team by Team

The award for most improved team would be split between McLaren and Force India, no doubt about it. Hamilton is very happy with his weekend so far: "We're definitely in a position to fight for a podium, but trying to beat the Brawns and the Red Bulls will be difficult. The car is still a work-in-progress and there's a way to go - but this is really encouraging. I don't mind if it rains tomorrow but I'd just like a nice, smooth race!" Kovalainen is also impressed with how things are going: "Today worked out better for me than expected: we can be very pleased with that. My tyre strategy worked really well this afternoon and I had the right tyres in Q2 when the conditions were at their trickiest. Thanks to the team for a superb job in a very tight situation."

Force India are also cheered by their current performance, Sutil says: "I'm really happy, for sure one of F1's happiest guys today! It's my home race and my best qualifying position so far in F1, so it was a great qualifying for us. It was very tricky with the weather but our decisions were very good and on time, particularly in Q2 with the rain." Fisichella wasn't quite so lucky and starts from 18th, but he is happy for Sutil and hopeful that he might get a chance for something during the race.



Ferrari got into the top ten but are maybe not as high as they would have liked. Massa can't quite make up his mind how he feels about it: "This qualifying was a bit of a lottery: first dry, then rain then dry again. It could have gone better, but it could also have gone much worse. I'm not jumping for joy over eighth place, but it's not so bad." Raikkonen thinks it was the tyres that ruined it, he says: "It was a pretty complicated session, with track conditions changing all the time. Therefore, it's difficult to say if this result reflects the real standings down the order. Clearly, we were penalized by not having a single set of new tyres for Q3. I believe that in normal conditions we could have got a better grid position."

Over at BMW, both drivers felt like they had potential but couldn't make it work when it mattered. Heidfeld says: "It wasn't too bad in free practice, I was tenth in Q1, and also in Q2 it looked as if I could make it into the top ten qualifying. But then we just had bad luck with our tyre choice." And Kubica adds: "We brought some new parts to the Nürburgring and the car made some progress. Unfortunately, my car didn't react how it should. I have struggled with my car's behaviour."

Toro Rosso finished towards the back, as usual, and Bourdais isn't impressed. He says: "To be honest, it doesn't make much difference if you're seventeenth or twentieth and tomorrow, I will try my best and see what we can do." Buemi is slightly, only slightly more upbeat about things: "I think I could have got into Q2 if I had not got caught in traffic. Other than that, I feel we did the best we could, given we are still waiting for our car updates."

Over at Toyota, Glock isn't at all happy: "That was definitely a disappointing result and it is not what I expected for my home Grand Prix. The weather was too cold for us because since Silverstone I have struggled to get the most out of the tyres over one lap; I don't know if it is only the temperatures or something else as well." Trulli thinks it's going to be a tough race: "Obviously it's frustrating to qualify in 14th because I am more used to fighting in the top six but we can only do our best in the race tomorrow and see what happens."

The Williams team are disappointed with their results, as they felt they were stronger in Free Practice. Nakajima admits: "To get it right, you needed to have perfect timing and make the right decision with the tyres. Today we just missed that a bit and that was it. The overall order in the top 10 is a bit different, so maybe this provides some possibilities for the race." Rosberg adds that if it had stayed dry they would have been okay, but it was the weather that beat them.

Renault are thinking exactly the same, with Alonso suggesting that if it rains tomorrow they can make up some places. Piquet adds: "The conditions were difficult today, but I managed to deal with them well and had the right tyres at the right moments. It's a shame that I couldn't get any more out of Q3, but it's good to be in the top ten and hopefully we will be in a position to score points tomorrow."

Brawn GP finally regained some of their pace, albeit on a lighter fuel load than those around them. Barrichello said: "I really enjoyed the excitement of qualifying today and am very happy to have come away with second and be starting from the front row tomorrow." And Button is thankful for the smaller things, such as: "Just getting into the final qualifying session was an achievement today so I'm really pleased to have qualified in third. It was a pretty eventful hour and Q2 in particular was madness but it was good fun."

Finally, Red Bull then, and Vettel explains away his fourth position: "Today's qualifying was a bit of a lottery - especially in Q2, as you never knew which tyres to put on. In Q3, it was back to dry tyres, but it was very tight. The circuit was getting better through the session, but my last lap wasn't magnificent, which is why I'm not on the front row." And pole sitter Mark Webber is understandably happy, saying: "This is a very special day for me. I've been close to getting pole a few times in the past. Today we're here and the team has done a great job. We've been quick all weekend and all the teams and drivers got really tested in that session. It was very, very chaotic and to deliver the lap time when it absolutely counted was very important to me. Getting the best time is fantastic."



Quote of the Day

That's it for today. Don't forget to join us on sidepodcast.com for live commenting as the race gets underway. We'll be there throughout the buildup, all the action, and the aftermath as well. I'll leave you with this quote from McLaren's Martin Whitmarsh: "First of all, congratulations to Mercedes-Benz for having five of their engines in the top seven – what a magnificent result. Obviously, we've made a step forward and having both cars on the third row is a fine achievement."

