



F1 Digest 2009 – Belgium Free Practice

This is F1 Digest 2009 – Belgium Free Practice.

After all the hype of everyone's favourite circuit this week, it's time to get down to business.

Free Practice 1

Ahead of the first session at Spa, the track temperature was at 20 degrees C, and the air at 17. There was a distinct threat of rain. Vettel and two Force Indias headed out on track first, but led a stream of cars as they fed out for their installation laps. Barrichello was the last to get one lap on the board, and then we had to settle in to wait for our first official time.

Alguersuari put in the first lap, just a tenth or two over the two minute mark. Glock also headed out but returned to the pitlane without a time. The drivers began to break ranks and it was Trulli who first dropped into the 1:49s, which was much closer to the time we expected.

After half an hour, Alonso completed a lap to slip into third, and Renault hinted that it was going to rain very soon. And it did. Fisichella was the sole remaining driver on track, and he soon dived into the pit lane as well. At this point Alguersuari had completed the most laps with just 8, and only half the field had set a time.

After ten minutes in the garage, Alguersuari headed out. It was still raining, and the track was wet, but probably a good experience for him. Buemi also joined in, and together they started to clear the track. Badoer and Barrichello were next, although Rubens returned to the garage pretty quickly.

Badoer was getting some much needed practice in, as he ran wide a couple of times, and was told over the radio to stop pushing when the tyres were graining. Buemi spun it, and tapped the barrier, no major damage done, and he rejoined the race track with a wonky front wing. Unsurprisingly, he headed straight back to the pits.

More drivers were heading out on track but the times were naturally much slower than their previous outings. Webber set a 2:06 and Grosjean a 2:10.

Twenty minutes to go, and all the drivers had set a time but Vettel and Hamilton. Neither looked like they were about to make an appearance, either. Gradually the others returned to the pitlane as well, and we were left with just five drivers on track. Then it was just Rosberg and Glock, then just Rosberg, and then with ten minutes to go... no one.

It was just the calm before the storm, as the laps began again, Kovalainen and Buemi were the first couple out, and Heikki did have a quick trip through the gravel as he explored the limits of the grip. Almost everyone returned to the track in the last few minutes, and once the session was over, they went for a practice start on the grid.

Results

Trulli finished the session on top, although his lap time was set in the very early moments of practice. He completed 13 laps altogether with 1:49.675 being his fastest time. Button and Alonso were next in the 1:50s and this gets a little Noah's Ark. Buemi and Alguersuari had 1:51s, Barrichello and Raikkonen 1:52s, and Kovalainen and Kubica settled for 1:53s.



Badoer finished right in the middle of the pack – not so bad for him, having completed 20 laps. Fisichella was the first to drop into the 2 minute mark, with Rosberg, Grosjean and Heidfeld behind him. Nakajima, Sutil and Webber were next, with Glock posting the slowest of the times. Vettel and Hamilton did not set a time.

Free Practice 2

FP2 got underway with a much drier track. The air temperature up to 18 degrees C, and the track up to 27. Cars headed out the second the session was underway, and it was full laps straight away as Kovalainen got the first time on the board. Only Vettel remained in the garage, whilst Alonso dipped into the 1:49s to go top. After just five minutes, the session was red flagged as one of the wheel bins had fallen off Badoer's car. The marshals retrieved the offending item from the track, and the session got underway again.

Trulli led the way, but everyone followed, this time Vettel included. Barrichello had a quick spin but continued onwards. Meanwhile, Webber had topped Alonso's time, as Vettel jumped up to P5. Moments later it was Hamilton on top.

It must have been a grumpy day in the paddock, as the drivers took it in turns to complain about their cars. Button was on the radio to his engineers because he was losing control of the back of the car through some of the trickier corners. Vettel then had problems with the heat in the car, and felt like his seat was burning. Alonso re-took the top spot, whilst Badoer, three seconds down the line, was last. The battle for the top was between Hamilton, Alonso and Webber, as the three of them traded fastest laps, until Trulli slotted himself neatly in third, then improved to second, just behind Webber. The Red Bull managed to run wide, neatly finding some run off area to guide him safely back on track.

Kubica took his turn to moan, I mean, provide feedback to his engineers about his troubles with the car, whilst Grosjean had a bit of a wobble but continued onwards unscathed. Sutil popped up to third, but he had cut the chicane at Bus Stop so his time was disallowed. Glock jumped up to second, pushing his teammate down a place. It was close though, the top 15 were split by just 8 tenths of a second. Badoer was still 2.5 seconds off the pace.

With under ten minutes to go, Glock improved to take the top spot, and then returned to the pitlane. Everybody else was out, trying to improve on their times, and Hamilton jumped the Toyota by one hundredth of a second. Glock returned to try and defend his time but it was not to be. On the very last lap, Raikkonen pulled to a stop at the side of the track, and the marshals recovered the car. Alguersuari also ended up stopped on the grass, and Hamilton ran super wide off track, recovering to return to the pitlane. Save all the action to the last minute, won't you boys?

Results

Hamilton took the fastest lap with a 1:47.201 after 29 laps. Glock also completed the same number of laps to finish second. Raikkonen and Webber followed, with Grosjean behind them. Fisichella was up to 6th, with Trulli 7th and Kubica 8th. Alguersuari was next, with two Sebastian's Vettel and Buemi behind.

Kovalainen finished 12th, followed by Sutil, Alonso and Nakajima. Heidfeld was the first man to drop into the 1:48s, joined by Button, Barrichello and Rosberg. Badoer completed the day with a 1:49.211.

Team by Team

It's worth saying before we start that a lot of the press quotes from the teams are really short. I guess with limited running in the morning, there isn't that much to say! However, we shall begin with Ferrari, and Badoer says: "I still haven't managed to find the ideal settings for my driving style and so, I didn't have the right feel for the car to attack all the corners. We still have a session available to us to work on the car tomorrow morning. My aim for qualifying is



simple: to make the cut at the end of Q1." I have no idea how he thinks that is going to happen, but good on him for aiming high. Raikkonen simply says he is pleased with the work they did and he feels pretty positive.

Over at Brawn, Button is sort of glad it rained: "It was a tough session this morning as we weren't able to get much done apart from some wet running at the end. However that experience is good here just in case it rains over the weekend which is always possible at Spa." Barrichello adds: "We got through a lot of work today which sets the weekend up nicely. There is still some way to go to realise the full potential of the car but as always on a Friday, the lap times don't tell the whole story."

For Toro Rosso, Buemi just says it's a great circuit and he's happy with how things went. Alguersuari says: "It's nice to drive a Formula 1 car on a track where you feel at ease. I'm getting a better feeling for the car now and we made some good improvements to it during the two sessions, even if there is a little bit more still to come."

Toyota had a good day and Trulli is feeling much better about the car: "Obviously there is still work to do to get the most out of the car and I need to find a bit more grip at the rear end but all in all I am very happy with the results today. I have a good feeling from the car so I hope it will be a competitive weekend for us." Glock adds: "It's hard to draw any conclusions from the wet session this morning but I am pleased to be second in the afternoon. That is very encouraging."

Sutil believes they have potential this weekend, although they were suffering with understeer for a good proportion of the day. He says he had traffic on his last lap, so 13th was the best he could do. Fisichella finished 6th but isn't reading anything into it: "It's difficult to say where we will be tomorrow, but top 15 is realistic and of course we will try our best to get in the top 10 but it is going to be very difficult."

Grosjean found today very interesting with the changeable conditions, and once again thanks Alonso for his help. For his part, Fernando says: "We did quite a few laps today, especially in P2. In P1 we were affected quite a lot by the rain, but in the afternoon we were able to concentrate on evaluating the tyres and we are happy with the balance we have with the car."

Vettel is one of the few who is grateful that the rain halted running in the morning, because he didn't have much mileage available to him anyway. He says it has been a good start to the weekend, though. Webber says: "We had a pretty productive afternoon with plenty to go through. We didn't always move in the right direction, but that's not always a bad thing as we learn from it."

Over at BMW, Heidfeld was slightly surprised at finding the harder tyre the better one to run on, but otherwise sums up his day as: "quite okay." Kubica says: "We had to squeeze quite a lot into the second free practice session, and on top of that we evaluated the tyres and worked on the set-up. It was quite difficult as we had to cram several things into a very tight programme. We even had to mix several evaluations in one run."

Williams had a tough day and both drivers say so. Rosberg: "It was not a good day today. The car was a long way from the pace and with the weather this morning, we only had one session to try and make a difference, which was not enough given how far behind we were." And Nakajima: "It was a difficult day for us. The balance of the car was not too bad but we just need to find some more performance from the car from the other aspects we can change."

Finally, McLaren finished the day on top. Kovalainen was down in 12th, but says: "I think slower speed corners suit our car better than high-speed stuff... but we've definitely made some good improvements in this area and the car feels positive to drive..." Hamilton says: "I'm happier today than I expected. We don't have as much downforce as some of the other teams, so we're not as quick as we'd like to be, especially in the middle sector. Fortunately, however, we have KERS and can use it to our advantage in the first and third sectors."



Quote of the Day

That's all for today, we'll be back tomorrow with full coverage of the final Free Practice session plus qualifying, whether you're on Sidepodcast.com for live commenting, or listening to the F1 Digest roundup. Until then, I'll leave you with this quote from BMW's Willy Rampf: "The second sector, with its quick corners, is the most important one and this is what we have to focus on. Once again the field is very close with 18 cars classified within one second."

