



F1 Digest 2009 – Japan Free Practice

This is F1 Digest 2009 – Japan Free Practice.

The dreaded rain appeared today, which meant we were in for a quiet couple of sessions.

Free Practice 1

Ahead of FP1, it emerged that Timo Glock was suffering from a heavy cold and fever and had been advised to rest up for the day. Kamui Kobayashi, reserve driver for Toyota, would be filling in for him during the practice sessions. Speculation rife over whether he has been fired, or if Toyota are using the opportunity to run a Japanese driver at the Japanese circuit. It was wet out there, though, so we weren't expecting much running. The track temperature was 24 degrees C, and the air at 21.

Vettel was the first to test out the track but he soon returned to the safety of the garage. The rain began to ease slightly, and twenty minutes in, we saw Kovalainen put the first time on the board. He posted a rather slow 1:52, which was immediately beaten by almost three seconds by teammate Hamilton. Raikkonen and Vettel also came out and managed to stay ahead of Heikki.

Half an hour gone, and Alonso managed to narrowly avoid the wall after running wide. It still looked very slippery out there, but he kept on going and popped up to P1.

With things drying up, the times started dropping. Vettel posted a 1:43, topped moments later by Hamilton. Finally, all the cars had a time on the board, and for a moment, Nakajima was top of the timesheets. Kobayashi was also up to ninth – a good day for the Japan crowd, until Kovalainen knocked Nakajima from the top.

In the last few minutes of the session, it was all change at the top. Sutil had a taste of P1, then Buemi, Hamilton and Nakajima, but in the end it was Heikki Kovalainen who got the final flying lap in.

Results

Kovalainen finished on top ahead of Nakajima and Sutil, with Fisichella in fourth. Those four completed laps in the 1:40s, with the next five dropping into the 1:41s. Buemi was 5th, with Hamilton 6th, and then Alonso, Raikkonen and Barrichello behind. Rosberg ended the morning 10th, followed by Webber and Liuzzi. Trulli next, Alguersuari, then Kubica and Heidfeld, just a tenth off each other's pace. Vettel was 17th, Button 18th, then Kobayashi and Grosjean finished off the order.

Free Practice 2

Ah, this will be a short section. Practice 2 was just as wet as the morning session, with the track temperature at 23 degrees C and the air at 22. This time, it was still raining, though. The Toro Rossos were the first cars out on track, but it was again not expected to be a busy session, with teams not happy to use up their limited allocation of wet tyres. Both drivers returned to the pitlane without setting a time.

After an entire hour of nothing, Fernando Alonso braved the elements to take to the track. He led the charge, although it can hardly be called a charge, as Alguersuari and Grosjean joined the fun. Alguersuari was the first lap time, and after a few minutes, Alonso re-emerged and knocked a full eight seconds off it. With ten minutes left, the action actually got underway, with Sutil taking the top spot, and only Kovalainen, plus the two Brawns remaining in the garage.



Results

Sutil finished on top having completed a whopping five laps. His time was a non-representative 1:47, but he was about seven tenths faster than next place Vettel. Liuzzi was 3rd, with Hamilton, Nakajima and Buemi behind. Alonso finished the day 7th, followed by Trulli and the hardest working man Alguersuari with... 11 laps.

Kubica was 10th, followed by Raikkonen, Kobayashi, Webber and Grosjean. Fisichella wound up 15th, with Rosberg and Heidfeld the last of the time-setters. Kovalainen, Button and Barrichello posted no times.

Team by Team

I can't imagine the teams have much to say after such a quiet day but let's see. Starting with Ferrari, Fisichella says: "The day was all about the rain that however should not be a factor on Sunday, which makes everything more complicated." Oh joy. Of the work Raikkonen did complete, he says: "I concentrated mainly on the car, trying to understand its handling and I think the situation is reasonably good. We will have to try everything to defend our third place in the constructors' classification: it will be difficult because the McLarens are very strong and in Singapore they got a great result, although they have not yet got ahead of us."

Barrichello explains their lack of running: "As we expected, the rain came to Suzuka today and it led to an unusually quiet opening day of practice. The morning session wasn't too bad but the rain this afternoon was heavy enough to create small rivers on parts of the track and there was nothing to be gained by going out." Button adds: "I feel sorry for the fans at Suzuka today but unfortunately we can't get any useful information in these conditions with so much water on the track."

Buemi disagrees with that though: "I really liked my first day driving this track, even though it was so wet. It's a fantastic circuit. Anyway, it's useful to drive in the rain and we can see from this morning's session, when everyone went out, that we have quite a quick car in these conditions." Alguersuari says similar things, adding that they now know how the car works on the wet tyres, but he is hoping for a dry session tomorrow.

Over at Toyota, Kobayashi had a strange start to the day: "I only heard I would be driving today at 8.30 this morning when I was on my way to the circuit; it was a bit of a surprise because even though I knew Timo was sick, I wasn't expecting this. It was a really good opportunity for me but the conditions were pretty bad and I didn't get a lot of laps in the end." Trulli openly admits he has very little to say after today's limited running.

Renault are also quite quiet, with Alonso saying they are happy with the car, but everything will be new tomorrow, and Grosjean adding that he completed a few laps to learn the circuit but they haven't established much about setup yet.

Rosberg confirms they have learnt something today: "Today was just a matter of trying out the tyres in order to get an understanding of where the change over points are and how the inters and full wets are working, degradation-wise. What was clear was that I pretty much destroyed the wets when the track dried out." Nakajima is getting positive vibes for the weekend ahead, but again, he's hoping for dry weather.

Vettel narrows down the age old problem: "In P1 it was too dry for the extreme wets and by the end, also for the inters, but it was too wet for the dry tyres too." He also adds: "The circuit is fun to drive here, even in the wet. Let's hope for more consistent conditions tomorrow, but I think we have a competitive package whatever the weather, so let's see." Webber says they did just a few laps at the end of the day to see where they're going, but he doesn't let us know where that is.



Over at McLaren, Kovalainen explains his reasons for not setting a time in FP2: "This morning the track was in a better condition than it was in the afternoon so we decided not to go out in second practice. We think tomorrow and Sunday will be dry so we didn't want to risk any damage to the car in these tricky conditions." Hamilton says he took matters into his own hands though, as he enjoys the track so much: "We didn't do much running – we weren't supposed to be running this afternoon, but I couldn't help it: I just had to go out and have a little bit of fun!" Heidfeld and Kubica don't have much to say about the day. Heidfeld acknowledges the fans who were out there in nasty weather, whilst Kubica says they are simply going to be guessing for tomorrow.

Finally, Force India, and Sutil ended up on top: "This morning we did just 14 laps and things went quite well. I was confident we would be back on the pace in Suzuka and at the moment it looks like this: overall we are looking much better than in Singapore." Liuzzi is also very upbeat: "Everything is responding and working well, although we do know tomorrow could be different if the weather changes, but we are optimistic."

Quote of the Day

That's all for today. Let's hope the weather does clear up tomorrow, because the fans could do with seeing some cars out on track. I'll leave you with this quote from Renault boss Bob Bell: "The forecast suggests that it could be wet tomorrow morning, but it should be dry for qualifying and the race. Therefore we may well start qualifying running dry tyres for the first time, which could make for a very interesting session."

sidepodcast.com
YOUR WEEKLY F1 FIX