



F1 Digest 2009 – Japan Qualifying

Welcome to F1 Digest 2009 – Japan Qualifying.

If yesterday saw very little action out on track, then today more than made up for it.

Free Practice 3

The track was dry when FP3 was ready to get going. Both the track and air temperatures were at 25 degrees C, and the humidity about 49%. There was talk that there might be showers during the morning, but thankfully it held off.

When the lights went green at the end of the pit lane, there was a queue of drivers desperate to get some dry running under their belts. Button had a rubbish start by colliding with Alguersuari on their out lap. The Brawn car's front wing was broken, so he returned to the pitlane.

Raikkonen put in the early benchmark, with Trulli and Alonso clinging to his coat tails. Trulli improved to take the top spot, and then Buemi topped them all.

With just fifteen minutes to go, cars starting straying off track. Heidfeld had a bit of a wobble, Grosjean ran across the grass after messing up the chicane, and then Webber hit the kerbs at Turn 8, crashing into the barriers. Yellow flags were waved, as he exited the car and returned to the pitlane.

Buemi looked like he might get a moment of glory with his P1 time, but then Trulli finished his flying lap and did it for the home crowd.

Results

Trulli finished on top with a 1:31.709 having completed 24 laps. Buemi was second and Rosberg third. Vettel finished fourth, but actually only five tenths faster than teammate Webber who crashed out and ended the morning 19th. Raikkonen was 5th, followed by Sutil, Barrichello and Kovalainen. Button was 9th with Alguersuari 10th. The second half of the timesheets was headed up by Grosjean, then Heidfeld, Alonso and Glock. Nakajima finished 15th, followed by Hamilton, Kubica and Fisichella. Then the aforementioned Webber, and Liuzzi finished off the order.

Qualifying

Before qualifying got going, it was confirmed that Webber wouldn't be able to take part as the Red Bull chassis was really quite damaged, and the mechanics hadn't been able to fix it up in time. Liuzzi was also confirmed to have a five place grid drop due to a gearbox change.

As predicted, it was nice and dry, with the air temperature at 26 degrees, and the track at 40 degrees. Toro Rosso sent their cars out first, and on Buemi's first lap, he made the exact same mistake as Webber. He spun through the gravel, into the tyres backwards, but did manage to pull away.

Halfway through the session, and Vettel was on top ahead of Trulli and Kubica. Meanwhile, with Buemi still in the garage, it was the bottom three to worry about, and that was Grosjean, Alguersuari and Fisichella. With five minutes to go, the mechanics had worked so hard that Buemi was back out on track and ready to set another lap time.

At the top, Hamilton was up into second, whilst at the back, Liuzzi had fallen into what was now the bottom four. Vettel remained in the garage from P1, which meant everyone was out on track bar first and last place. No one beat his time, and towards the back, things didn't change drastically, either.



The fastest three were Vettel, Hamilton and Button, whilst we lost Fisichella, Nakajima, Grosjean, Liuzzi and of course, Webber.

Raikkonen was the first man out for Q2, but half the pack followed him. On the outlaps, once again, we saw another Toro Rosso into the barriers at the same corner yet again! This time it was Alguersuari in the tyres, he went in head on and was actually in the car for quite a while, but climbed out with the doctors by his side. He went off to the medical centre for a checkup but seemed okay, if a little dazed.

The session restarted with 11 minutes left on the clock, and only Raikkonen with a time. Only Trulli managed to get a laptime on the board, before we had another red flag. Glock had gone into the tyre barriers at the final turn, in a seriously high speed crash. The car was almost embedded into the barrier, but the marshals and the medical car were there very quickly. They got him out of the car and onto the stretcher, the helicopter was warming up and he was taken straight to hospital. He gave a thumbs up as he was stretchered into the ambulance, though.

Alonso lined up at the end of the pitlane, waiting for the session to restart. Rosberg lined up behind him, and they were both off and away as soon as the pitlane was opened. The rest followed, with the Brawn cars waiting in the garage for the last possible minute. Given how the session was going, this was quite the risk. They came out with just over two minutes left to go.

Hamilton popped up into P1, beaten by Vettel. The yellow flags were out, as Buemi had lost his front wing. He had run wide off track, and battered his way along the barriers, leaving debris all over the track.

The Brawn cars were on their flying laps, Button in 4th, Barrichello in 6th, but had they backed off when they saw the flags?

The fastest three were Vettel, Hamilton and Trulli, whilst dropping out Rosberg, Alonso, Kubica and of course, Glock and Alguersuari.

The final ten minutes got underway, with Sutil out first, and the rest joining him soon. Buemi qualified into the top ten but was unable to take part in the session due to his last minute crash in Q2.

After three minutes and before any lap times were set, Heikki Kovalainen found himself the next victim of the same Webber/Alguersuari corner. Getting on the kerbs, he lost control and bashed into the barriers. He was out of the car and walking away fine, if a little annoyed.

The session restarted, Raikkonen out first, setting the first lap time of Q3. Hamilton slipped in behind him, whilst Vettel jumped up on top. For some reason I thought they were all ready to do another lap but that was it, and so, the session came to an abrupt end. For me at least!

Results

Vettel took pole position, then, ahead of Trulli and Hamilton. Sutil lines up fourth on the grid, with Barrichello in fifth – two places ahead of teammate Button. Heidfeld is between them. Raikkonen qualified 8th, whilst Kovalainen lines up 9th and then Buemi 10th.

Furhter back, it's Rosberg, Alonso, Kubica, then Glock, Alguersuari, Fisichella, Nakajima, Grosjean, Liuzzi and Webber.

Adjustments

Now, here things get very messy. The FIA started handing out penalties and have actually said they won't announce the official grid until tomorrow morning.



Here's what we do know though: Buemi was given a five place grid drop for continuing on after his collision to the pitlane. They deemed that he had a dangerous car, and as he left debris all over the track, he had impeded the other drivers.

Those drivers that he impeded included Sutil, Barrichello, Button and Alonso, and they, in turn, were also given five place grid drops for speeding through the yellow flags.

That's one set of penalties out the way. We already knew that Liuzzi would be changing his gearbox, but Kovalainen has also received a five place drop for doing the same. Finally, Webber and Glock – if he runs – will be using a new chassis – so they will start from the pitlane.

The grid as we know it right now is as follows: Vettel, Trulli, Hamilton, Heidfeld and Raikkonen. Rosberg, Kubica, Sutil, Barrichello and Alguersuari.

Button, Fisichella, Kovalainen, Buemi, Nakajima, Grosjean, Alonso, Liuzzi, Glock and Webber.

That is all subject to change though. Don't hold me to it. Blame the FIA.

Fuel Loads

The fuel loads, for what they are worth amongst this chaos, show Sutil very light and Vettel relatively heavy. Barrichello through to Raikkonen have similar loads as each other and as Vettel, whilst Kovalainen has quite a lot on board.

Further back, Nakajima is the heaviest on the grid, and Alonso isn't far behind. Fisichella has quite a light fuel load for those running outside the top ten, whilst Webber and Glock could not declare their weights.

Team by Team

Let's start with Toyota, as they only have quotes from Trulli. As far as we know, Glock was air lifted to hospital with a leg wound, and complaining of back pain, but other than that he is okay. The team won't make any decisions on him driving until tomorrow. Meanwhile, Trulli says: "Obviously I feel for Timo because we could both have been starting at the front of the grid today. It was good to hear quickly from the team that he is okay; just a bit upset he isn't in the top six with me. It was a crazy qualifying session in general with all the red flags and I am really happy with this result, especially in front of all our Japanese fans."

Over at McLaren, Hamilton was surprised by their performance: "We didn't expect to be as competitive as we were this afternoon. Our car was tricky this morning and we had to make some significant changes between sessions. It was impossible to extract the best from the car, especially through the first sector. We didn't have much time to develop a dry set-up so we went into qualifying hoping that the changes would work - and they did." Kovalainen says: "I went a bit too fast into Turn Eight, over the kerb, and the car broke out and I couldn't get it back on the track. So it was game over. Today's three accidents prove that everybody is pushing the limit as much as possible as the running time in the dry was very limited."

Kubica feels a little hard done by after today's running: "My qualifying was totally disappointing. All my flying laps in the second session were destroyed by red or yellow flags. In the entire fifteen minutes we were not able to do one quick timed lap." Meanwhile, Heidfeld is relatively happy for his performance, and is glad to point out he did slow down for the flags: "In Q2 I saw the yellow flags and lifted my foot off the pedal and raised an arm to indicate I had reduced speed where I was required to. I was a couple of tenths slower."



The Brawn GP quotes came out before the penalties, and Barrichello says: "I'm pleased to be ahead of Jenson on comparable fuel loads in the final session. It was tough today and you had to maintain your concentration despite all the incidents and delays. Suzuka is a fantastic track, one of the best that we race on, but today shows just how tricky it is to drive." Button says that the interruptions weren't too much of a problem for them: "Three red flags during qualifying is very unusual and I hope that everyone involved is ok. It wasn't too stressful as we had all the information that we needed and just had to keep calm and focus on our next run."

At Williams, Rosberg isn't sure about the day's running: "I'm not overly happy with my performance today but I didn't feel particularly comfortable in the car. The first part of qualifying was ok, but I never found the same level of grip after that." Nakajima agrees on the grip topic: "We didn't really get the grip in the dry conditions or get the most out of the car today. I'm really disappointed. Yesterday was a pretty good day in the wet, but it just didn't go right in the dry. It's very nice to be at home in front of so many fans, I just hope to be able to do better for them tomorrow."

Fisichella feels he is making progress: "I am very disappointed not to have made it through to Q2. We only had this morning's free practice to prepare the car in the dry, but I think all the same, I improved my performance level, growing ever more confident in the F60." Raikkonen thinks they'll struggle this weekend: "Here, the situation is definitely better than in Singapore, but we continue to struggle, especially with a lack of aerodynamic downforce, which makes itself felt especially in the first sector."

For Toro Rosso, both drivers made contact with the barriers at one point or other. Alguersuari explains: "Before the accident, I was pushing hard on the hard tyre. I lost control and went into the wall. It was quite a heavy impact. The car looks very bad, but I'm fine. I felt confident in the fast Turn 9, so I was going for it, until I went a little bit too fast on the hard tyre and once I was on the grass, I had no grip." Buemi is kicking himself though: "I'm not happy, as I made it through to Q3, but after crashing the car I couldn't take part. A great shame as this would have been my second Q3 of the season and the car was super today. I was reasonably comfortable so maybe I didn't need to do that last lap."

Despite getting a penalty, Alonso thinks he did do the right thing: "I was called by the stewards because I had a green second sector under yellow flags. I explained that coming out of turn 14 I had little visibility because of the dust left from Buemi spinning into the gravel ...then I saw debris of a wing in the middle of the track, which I avoided and at that point I saw the yellow flag and immediately slowed down and came carefully into the pits." Grosjean rues the rain and the lack of running as he hasn't been on this track before, and really, he's just hoping to move forward in the race tomorrow.

Over to Force India, where Sutil did qualify 4th but has received the five place grid drop. Before that was announced, he said: "We had a really hard weekend in Singapore and it's nice to be back: it's just fantastic for the team. Tomorrow it will be a tough, long race but I'm just going to focus on what I have to do. I will do my best." Liuzzi struggled right from the beginning: "We had a few issues in the morning in free practice with the gearbox and we couldn't test everything we needed to, including the soft tyres, which cost us a lot. The guys did a great job to change the 'box and get out again for qualifying but we had a lot of understeer in qualifying and it was not 100% as a result."

Finally, Red Bull have secured pole position. Webber didn't take any part in qualifying today, after the crash in Free Practice, so he has nothing to say, but Vettel says: "The car worked fantastically today and we were quickest in Q1, Q2 and Q3. The most difficult was probably Q3, due to running with race fuel and only having one lap. It's not easy through the S-bends and the tyres don't really last for a second lap. I'm very happy, we're back to full strength since Singapore and have now put the car on pole. A good day today, now let's see tomorrow."



Quote of the Day

That's all for today. Yesterday we had a short digest, today a massive one, I wonder what tomorrow's race show will be like. Don't forget to join us on Sidepodcast.com as we all try and make sense of the madness. I'll leave you with this quote from Norbert Haug: "After three very hectic and challenging qualifying sessions, the most important news is that Timo Glock is safe after his accident. Everyone in our team wishes Timo well, and I am sure the whole paddock – and especially his German fans back home – have the same feelings."

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