

F1 Digest - Spain Qualifying

Intro

Welcome to F1 Digest, and the third show for the Spanish GP weekend. We've already looked at the Free Practice sessions from Friday, so now it's time to move on to FP3 and Qualifying.

Free Practice 3

Saturday morning dawned with the sun shining and the track temperature slightly warmer at 27 degrees C. As ever, installation laps were the name of the game, and then there was a sizeable pause in the action. Trulli was the first man to rev up his engine and take to the track for a full lap, and he obviously set a trend because soon after nine cars followed him out. A quarter of the way through the session and everyone had been out but Massa, whilst his team mate took to the track for his own full lap.

Dank left two messages on the Live Comment thread: "Rosberg told by engineer that they plan to go out again after 15 minutes of the practice session have elapsed. He's indicated that there are problems with the way his helmet moves against the headrest. Doesn't seem as though Hamilton will be back on track for a while either - busy chatting away with Ron Dennis and Norbert Haug after putting in an installation lap."

Raikkonen took an early lead, but he was soon beaten by Kovalainen and then oddly enough, Barrichello. Coulthard then went quickest, putting this Free Practice session into the odd category just like FP2 yesterday. Scott commented over on Sidepodcast.com, saying: "I reckon this morning's session is just going to be setup work for all the teams. The times aren't as fast as FP1."

Both Sutil and Coulthard had a spin, and many were struggling to keep their cars on the track, including Vettel and Barrichello. Webber had a problem, and having just made it back to the pit lane, pulled to a stop with a suspected throttle problem.

When the time began to tick down, drivers visited the pit lane one last time so they could attempt to pull out a stunning final lap. A mixture of tyres meant it was hard to judge actual performance, and with Kubica 2nd and Trulli 3rd, Heidfeld took the lead.

Right at the end of the session, Alonso and Davidson almost had a get together, but an incident was avoided. The final fastest five were: Heidfeld, Coulthard, Alonso, Kubica, and Trulli.

Quali 1

After the last two Practice sessions had revealed absolutely nothing about each team's pace relative to each other, it was down to qualifying to reveal some of the mystery. The first session saw the Force India boys hit the track first, with Kimi Raikkonen close behind them, out earlier than he normally would be. He had a slow first lap but hit the top with his second lap, but it was completely squashed by Hamilton, and Trulli settled in third. On the live comment thread, Scott said: "Nice oversteer there from Trulli. I love no TC!"

Things were calm for a few minutes, and then as we headed into the second half of the session, there were still 7 drivers still to set times. Alonso was one of those, but he came out and put his Renault in 3rd at the first time of asking. Bourdais managed to bring his Toro Rosso to P6.



Kovalainen took a bit of a risk and left it until there were just 4 minutes to go before leaving the garage, and he managed to hit 3rd on his first lap as well. As ever, the final few minutes were manic. Raikkonen took P1, and he, Massa, McLaren's and Kubica all felt they could sit it out in the garage.

When the session drew to a close, the fastest three were Raikkonen, Trulli and Alonso, and dropping out: Coulthard, Vettel, Fisichella, Sutil, Davidson and Sato.

Quali 2

Okay, so we all know that they tested in Barcelona last week but that's really no excuse for making us and all the fans at the track wait for some action. It was five whole minutes before a car hit the track. The Renault's were out first, followed by Glock and Bourdais. A few more minutes and everyone was out but the BMWs and Kovalainen.

Alonso put in a flying lap to take P1. Lou commented: "Nice lap from Alonso! He is doing well this weekend!" but it was only briefly, as he was beaten by Trulli, then Hamilton and then Raikkonen. Kubica put them all to shame though, by braking into the 1:20s for the first time of the weekend.

The obligatory pit stop for tyres left Heidfeld out by himself, but he soon joined the rest to change tyres and prepare for his flying lap. Bourdais was pushing from 16th to try and get into Q3 but made a mistake and decided to abort the entire lap. Trulli led the pack out of the pit lane and back onto the track, and the final minutes saw everyone jostling for position, with Massa eventually taking P1.

He was fastest followed by Kubica then Raikkonen, with Barrichello, Nakajima, Button, Glock, Rosberg and Bourdais all missing the cut.

SteveintheUK pointed out on Sidepodcast.com: "Only 4 tenths of a second between P1 and P10, should make for a close Q3." And Michael Roberts replied with: "That's crazy close. Ferrari could lose out if they don't go light enough in Q3. I don't know the stats but I can't remember the Safety Car being used round here before, so the shorter the better."

Quali 3

The final dash for pole saw Trulli out on track first, followed by Massa, Heidfeld and the rest of the pack weren't far behind. Massa posted an early P1, whilst Raikkonen appeared to have messed up his first lap somewhere, only scraping into 4th. Hamilton was 2nd and Alonso was in 3rd, leading Scott to comment: "Look at the top 4! It's 2007 all over again."

A final pit stop for everyone before their last dash for glory, Alonso stunned everyone by taking pole position. The crowd went wild, and although only momentarily, as Raikkonen snatched P1 from the Renault's grasp, it was still impressive for Alonso to be on the front row.

Corey posted on the live comment thread: "Wow! that was the best shoot out of the season. Alonso just inspired all of Spain. Raikkonen leaves it till the last second."

The final grid positions were: Raikkonen, Alonso, Massa, Kubica, Hamilton, Kovalainen, Webber, Trulli, Heidfeld and Piquet.

Conclusions

I'm doing a little experiment with this weekend's F1 Digest, and covering every single team in the conclusions section. I think with the crazy sessions we have seen so far, it's worth seeing what everyone's strategies are and what problems they're up against, but I'd like your feedback. If you want to hear about everyone, or you'd rather I went back to simply picking out the more interesting points from teams, please leave your thoughts at Sidepodcast.com.

So we'll start with Super Aguri. Not a particularly fruitful day for the drivers today, with Sato 22nd and Davidson just one place ahead in 21st on the grid. Sato seems to think they have improved since yesterday, although he struggled putting a fast lap together, whilst Davidson is sure that his lap was as good as it could be and sends his thanks to the team behind him.

Next up Force India, with Sutil in 20th and Fisichella in 19th. A slightly disappointing performance, considering how strong they've appeared in the Free Practice sessions, and both drivers pin it on mechanical issues. Fisichella says: "It is a bit disappointing after yesterday. It was difficult to make the tyres work properly so now we will see what will happen in the race. We've had some strong performances so let's see." Sutil got caught in traffic and had an issue with his brakes, so is quite disappointed with the results.

Toro Rosso had a tough day. Bourdais was confident they could get into Q2, which he did, but his final lap wasn't what he'd hoped for: "It was a bit frustrating, because it felt as though the car had some more in it. Then, on my last run I aborted the lap because I had a moment, which was down to the fact we tried something different to try and get rid of the understeer, but it did not give us grip and it upset the balance." Meanwhile, Vettel said he just wasn't confident in the car. Technical Director, Giorgio Ascanelli, said: "It was worth coming to Spain just to see Alonso's qualifying lap! As for us, the cars have run reliably so far and in performance terms we did what we could with what we had."

Williams had a tough day with Rosberg in 15th and Nakajima in 12th. Technical director Sam Michael said it was not what the team had hoped for but did say that being just outside the top ten can be an advantage with a choice of fuel levels, and they'll be hoping to fight into the points tomorrow.

Honda's main aim for this qualifying session was to get into the top ten, but unfortunately both drivers missed out. Barrichello wound up 11th and Button 13th, and they both say that although they weren't quick enough to get through to Q3, they have made progress and feel improvements in the car.

Trulli continues to bemoan the wind at the circuit, saying it was affecting the balance on his car, and although he managed to finish 8th, he doesn't think it will be an easy race. Glock, in 14th, couldn't understand why he couldn't improve his lap time in Quali 2, because he couldn't see any mistakes. Presumably, Toyota will be analysing the data quite closely tonight.

For Red Bull, Coulthard is shocked with his 17th position, especially considering Webber finished ten places ahead in 7th. Coulthard said: "I went out in a bunch of traffic and had Sutil behind me, so I couldn't back off, which compromised warming up the tyres. We believed we were fast enough to go through the first session only using prime tyres, which take longer to warm up than the options."

Another shocked driver is Lewis Hamilton, who lines up on the grid in 5th, he said: "Being on the third row is not the end of the world as we are surrounded by good drivers who all want to finish the race. The key is now to make a strong start and hopefully gain a couple of positions." Norbert Haug also shared his dismay, but said that as they were only three tenths off pole position, it may be all down to fuel, and should all shake out in the race.



With Kubica in 4th, Heidfeld is not happy with his 9th slot on the grid. He did mention having some graining on the tyres, but commented on the fact that Ferrari are as strong as expected, whilst Renault are much stronger than expected.

Alonso echoed that statement, saying: "Today's result made me very happy. The best day for me of the 2008 season and I hope there are many more like this to come. The team has been doing a tremendous job since Bahrain. We have had a difficult and disappointing start to the season, and today is the first step ahead."

Finally, Ferrari are on top once again, and it's Raikkonen's first pole of 2008: "I've been chasing pole for a while now, but for one reason or another, it always escaped me. But today I got it. There is no better place to start so I will try and make the most of that tomorrow." Massa confirms that he believes they'll be competitive tomorrow but anything can happen so we have to watch this space.

With Alonso on the front row, whether he's light on fuel or not, the first few corners tomorrow are going to make unmissable viewing. Join us on Sidepodcast.com for live commenting during the race, and tune in to F1 Digest tomorrow night for a full run down of all the action.

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