



F1 Digest - Monaco Free Practice

Intro

Welcome to a Thursday edition of F1 Digest, featuring all the action from today's events in Monaco. We're looking at Free Practice 1 and 2, and then we'll run through how the drivers feel about their day.

Free Practice 1

There's talk of rain in Monaco for the weekend, but as Free Practice began a day earlier than at any other circuit, the weather held off. Ahead of the first session, both track and air temperature hovered around 19 degrees. Fisichella was the first man out on track, this weekend thankfully waiting until the lights had gone green. He was joined on track by Rosberg, Vettel and Coulthard, and Lewis Hamilton also made an early appearance. It was installation laps all round, and the other drivers joined them so that after about ten minutes, all but Ferrari had had a taste of the Monaco tarmac.

The Toro Rosso boys were the first to head out for a proper lap, running the new STR3 to its maximum. On the Live Comment thread at Sidepodcast.com, Alianora noted: "I hope Vettel's remembered that his team is low on spares..." Vettel crossed the line first, but Bourdais was close behind and quicker by over 3 seconds. The gap was reduced over a few more laps, then the pair returned to the pit lane. Next out was Rosberg and Nakajima, Glock and Piquet.

Rosberg immediately put both the Toro Rossos and his team mate in the shade, and no one else looked able to touch him. With an hour still remaining, the Ferrari's joined the track, swiftly followed by the McLaren's. Massa headed up Raikkonen, then next time round the Finn got the edge, but Hamilton jumped them all, posting the fastest time.

Coulthard, who had just emerged to begin his first complete lap, slowed in the tunnel and pulled to the side of the track. Dank commented on Sidepodcast.com: "Go Red Bull reliability!!!" After the Red Bull car was cleared off the track, then the red flags came out.

Confusion reigned for a few moments, until we saw a reply of the marshals gathered around a drain. The cover had worked loose and water was leaking out onto the track. 15 minutes later, the problem was fixed, and all the cars bundled out onto the circuit. Amongst the traffic, both Heidfeld and Trulli pulled off track at seemingly the same time, the BMW having a mechanical issue, whilst the Toyota found contact with the barrier. Scott Woodwiss left a thought on the Live Comments: "Trulli's car just clipped the wall as he exited Portier, you can see the small bit of flame as his rear wheel touches it. For a moment, though, I thought his car had become as unreliable as the Red Bulls.... If that's entirely possible."

Hamilton continued to head up the pack, with Raikkonen trying to close the gap. He finally managed to take the top spot by using the maximum of the track and brushing past the barriers. In the dying moments, Hamilton looked like he might be able to grab it back, posting the fastest first sector of the day, but the lap tailed off and he couldn't improve on second place.

The fastest five at the end of the session were Raikkonen, Hamilton, Kovalainen, Massa, and Rosberg.

Free Practice 2

Before the second session got going, race control confirmed there would be no rain interruptions today, and whilst the air temperature remained the same, the track was sufficiently warmed up to get some faster times out of the cars.



Both Heidfeld and Coulthard, who suffered a lack of running in the first session, were out early, with the BMW setting an early benchmark. He was soon knocked down by Rosberg, and then pushed out of second by Nakajima, as the Williams continued to show fine form from this morning. Raikkonen and Hamilton brought their battle for the top spot through to FP2, with the Ferrari getting it on their first lap, and the McLaren taking it next time round. Rosberg wasn't to be outdone, however, and finished his lap in second. On the various drivers form, Lou left a comment on Sidepodcast.com saying: "Rosberg faster than Kimi, he is having a good afternoon." Whilst Scott Woodwiss and Harry had disagreeing views on Hamilton. Scott said: "Hamilton's looking on great form so far. I'm confident this will be his weekend," whilst Harry noted: "Lewis is sliding all over the place! I wonder if he'll land in the barriers with his driving style..."

Massa was pushing for a good time, so much so that he ran over one of the bollards at the chicane and knocked it loose. The tube rolled onto the track, and was retrieved, although not in time to prevent a bemused Raikkonen driving past.

An already manic session had only been going for twenty minutes when Alonso came out and took second, thoroughly showing up Piquet who was nestled down at the bottom of the timesheets.

Bourdais was the first man to try out the super-soft tyres, the first time they have been used this year, and he improved on his time, albeit for 17th place. Rosberg also put on the tyres and he took the fastest time.

Trulli repeated his mistake from the morning by hitting the wall again, although this time he was able to carry on. Piquet also made contact with the barriers, knocking his rear wing slightly, but he also continued on his way. A few minutes later, Alonso slid at exactly the same spot as his team mate but was less fortunate. He completely knocked the rear wing loose, and drove away with it hanging half off and scraping along the ground. The session was red flagged whilst the debris was cleared up, giving Alonso time to shake off the errant wing and return to the pits. He remained in the car as the mechanics went to work. Lou left a thought in the live comments: "Bet Renault are pleased they have an extra day to make sure their cars are fixed for Saturday."

When the session resumed, it appeared that everyone had taken the pit stop opportunity to change to the super softs, and the lap times dropped. Kubica posted the sixth fastest time and Raikkonen went third. One final pit stop and everyone was on their way for a last ditch effort to grab the headlines. As Hamilton left his pit box, he almost ran over one of the team, who was returning to the pit wall. Slightly embarrassing but it didn't put him off and he retained his lead over the others.

When the session finished, the fastest five were Hamilton, Rosberg, Raikkonen, Massa and Kovalainen.

Conclusions

If the promise of rain is to be believed, then the work done here today by our teams may not be as useful as they would hope. However, it seems like most of the drivers had a good time, but let's see which ones didn't.

Starting with Williams, Rosberg said it's great to be back driving in Monaco and he's feeling really confident in the car. That was reflected in his lap times, clearly. He said they didn't necessarily use the optimum set up but what they learned from it has indicated the way forward. Nakajima is also hoping to improve his car, saying: "Because of the free day tomorrow, we have lots of time to go through today's data which will help us prepare for qualifying."

So, Williams had a good time, but Toyota weren't so happy. Trulli had a difficult day, admitting that he made the mistake going into the tunnel that broke his rear suspension. In the second session, he says they had a problem with the floor of the car, which also meant missing out on some track time. Glock, meanwhile, is happy with his car, but



does say that there are a few things they can do to improve the speed, one of which is his own personal experience within the car.

One of the bigger team comparisons is going on between Alonso and Piquet, with Alonso having a good day. "Overall the two sessions have gone well for us. The track was very dirty this morning, but we made good progress with our programme and the car reacted well to the changes we made. We seem to be on the pace in the long runs, but we must now improve our performance over a single lap because qualifying here is vital." No mention of the mistake that led to his rear wing being missing. Piquet complains that Monaco is a difficult circuit, so he spent some of the day getting used to the track, hoping that he can feel comfortable in the car by Saturday. Again, no mention of the brush with the barriers. It was left to Pat Symonds who said that aside from the small damage done, they had a successful day.

BMW were very succinct when talking about their day. Kubica said he had a busy day that was "quite ok". Heidfeld said the engine failure cost them data, but "taking into account it is Monaco, I would say my car is very driveable."

Coulthard's troubles during FP1 were down to a throttle actuator problem, and whilst he purposefully drove more laps in the afternoon, he says he has only recovered "reasonably well." Webber admits the car isn't suited to the track but the good news is they know what to do to fix it.

Jenson Button had a good start to the weekend for Honda, with good balance and plenty of laps under his belt. Barrichello looks forward to the race, saying: "As always, we don't really know where we stand in terms of the competition yet as everyone will have been running different set-up and fuel programmes. Monaco is always a very open race where it is important to have a good qualifying session. The weather will no doubt play a part on Saturday and Sunday as it looks like we will have some rain."

Hamilton probably had the best day of all, finishing up the second session on top. He's determined to do well this year as this is his favourite track, and he's happy with the pace of the car. Kovalainen is moderately happy with his day, but not as chipper as Hamilton. "Towards the end of the second session when I put on a new set of tyres we had made some set-up changes which were not as positive as we thought they would be. In addition I wasn't pleased with my lap, so I am confident that we will continue to improve in Saturday's practice session."

That Toro Rosso finished towards the bottom of the timesheets is not something to worry about, according to Bourdais. "We always ran with a heavy fuel load so we should not read anything into the lap times. We are not where we want to be but I don't think we are as far behind as it might look." Vettel places the blame squarely with the new car, saying he was fighting the car at every corner on a circuit that he usually enjoys. At one point during the sessions, he said: "I'm completely lost," referring to the direction they need to go to set the car up.

Raikkonen is feeling pretty cool about the weekend. His day of practice was normal, and the sessions went quite well. He also says that a wet race would make things a bit complicated, but that old favourite, it'd be the same for everybody. Both Raikkonen and Massa make mention of the fact that they struggled slightly on the super-soft tyres, so that is something to be investigated but Massa in particular is happy with the step forward they have taken over last year.

For Force India, chief technical officer Mike Gascoyne sums up the day for us: "A reasonably good day, although both drivers had problems on their last runs on new tyres in the last session this afternoon. Giancarlo had a hydraulic problem that meant he couldn't run at the end and Adrian was on a much quicker lap but unfortunately just clipped the barrier at the last corner. These things can happen though, especially in Monaco. We did however get through a large amount of running and worked through the tyre programme. Overall the cars look quite competitive here so I am sure there is more to come over the weekend."



That's it for this episode of F1 Digest. Is it just me or does this whole Thursday thing completely throw you off? I will be back on Saturday, with all the action from Free Practice 3 and Qualifying, but don't forget to meet me in the Live Comment threads over at Sidepodcast.com. See you there.

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