



F1 Digest - France Free Practice

Intro

Welcome to F1 Digest, daily race weekend coverage brought to you by Sidepodcast. We'll be covering qualifying and the race later on in the weekend, but today it's all about Free Practice.

Free Practice 1

As we covered in yesterday's preview, the drivers aren't always Magny-Cours biggest fan, and with talk of a wet weekend as well, they're probably dreading it more than ever. However, Friday dawned nice and dry. The sun was shining, track temperature hovering at about 22 degrees, and air temperature a bit lower on 18.

Fisichella was the first man out on track, followed by Vettel, and a bunch of others. It was all installation laps and then back into the pit lane for a rest. All but the Ferrari boys tested the tarmac, but that was all the action we saw for almost twenty minutes. Scott Woodwiss left a note of frustration on the Live Comment thread on Sidepodcast.com: "Now comes the usual "45 minutes of nothingness". I wonder how long it will be before a rule is introduced against this kind of thing. Would at least mean we get someone on track."

Rosberg was the first to return to the circuit, followed by his teammate, both Toro Rosso boys and Piquet. These guys squabbled amongst themselves for a bit, with Rosberg posting the first benchmark, soon beaten by Vettel, on fine form today.

Kovalainen hit the track, and the top spot on his first go, but when the Ferrari's came out, it was time for a real battle. SidepodcastFan left a thought in the Live Comments: "How in the world did Kovi get those tires to operating temps? Impressive so far..." and Peter Mills was also impressed with Kovalainen: "It's about time Kovi got into the winners club, isn't it? Does he have what it takes in normal race conditions?" Massa knocked the McLaren down, and Raikkonen looked like he was going to do the same to his teammate. He was flying through the first two sectors but couldn't make it stick through the third and ended up, well, third. Kovalainen re-took his place at the top of the timesheets, just long enough for Hamilton to come along and snatch it from him.

After a few more laps, the track seemed to start losing grip. Piquet ran wide, Alonso found the going quite tough, and both McLaren drivers were wobbling around the tarmac somewhat. None of these were as bad as poor Sutil's luck, however, as he pulled out of the pit lane, and immediately stopped. His session was over. Trulli spun a complete 360 degrees, continuing on his lap as if it was all part of the plan. Alonso pulled off the track with smoke pouring from the engine, and Kovalainen just managed to keep his McLaren out of the wall.

Whilst we were watching all the struggles, Massa took the top spot, and retained it until the end of the session. He led the way from Hamilton, Kovalainen, Raikkonen and Kubica. A final comment from Scott in Italy on Sidepodcast.com made me chuckle: "It's always nice when I just arrive for the end of a session."

Free Practice 2

Between the two sessions, the air temperature warmed slightly to 22 degrees, whilst the track temperature improved massively to 41 degrees.

Both Renaults, a BMW and a Toro Rosso hit the track early, and there was none of the installation lap malarkey that we saw in FP1. Within a few minutes, Kubica set an initial time, soon beaten by Kovalainen, and then Hamilton. Even the Ferrari boys were out early, with Massa being the last driver to set a time, after only twenty minutes of the



session. Vettel was sitting nicely, and somewhat surprisingly, in second, but Alonso came and took that second place, as did Massa, and then Raikkonen.

Despite the temperature and track changes, or perhaps because of them, there still seemed to be grip problems, with Hamilton visiting a gravel trap, but keeping the McLaren out of the wall. Alianora picked up on another one over on Sidepodcast.com: "Is it me or is everyone going wide at the moment? Now Glock's decided he really needs a bit of gravel on his tyres..." Massa also skidded around a run off area, then he went fastest, then he visited the gravel again. Piquet also felt a trip to the gravel necessary, and Sutil joined the club as well.

Vettel took on the soft tyres earlier than many of the others, which may explain how he managed to stay up in the top few spots. There is no explanation for how he managed to be faster than Kubica, who was also on the soft tyres, though. Dr.J put it into perspective for us, though: "For those getting excited about Vettel and Bourdais, last year Speed and Liuzzi were 3rd and 5th in FP2. Qualified 15th and 17th. Both DNF in the race." A depressing thought. Lou had a happier thought though: "I am very impressed by Vettel, 4th is not where I expected to see him, specially as Le Seb is in 11th."

With fifteen minutes to go, the rest of the pack took on the softer option, and the times dropped somewhat. Hamilton went third, and Alonso put in a stunning lap to go fastest. Joe put it rather eloquently in the comments: "What the hell Fernando?! AWESOME!"

Very little changed in the last few minutes, and the final five were Alonso, Massa, Raikkonen, Hamilton and Vettel. All but Heidfeld and Barrichello were out on track when the chequered flag dropped, meaning they were on course to take part in the safety car ECU test. Yellow flags were waved, the safety car boards were brought out, but that's pretty much all we could see.

Conclusions

A mixed day for the teams. It's not often you find a driver topping the time sheets once his engine has exploded. Although, it is Renault's home race, so a little bit of headline grabbing is to be expected, isn't it? Let's see what they've got to say on the matter. Alonso first: "My mechanics did a remarkable job to fix the car and we were able to continue our free practice programme this afternoon without any problems. Looking ahead to qualifying tomorrow, I think that our level of performance is rather encouraging." He says our, of course, as Piquet ended the day 9th, which, isn't the best, but is probably his best. Nelson says the car still needs a few behavioural tweaks but he is pretty satisfied overall.

Magny-Cours isn't known as a Williams track, so with Rosberg 11th and Nakajima 14th, they're relatively satisfied. Rosberg says there were plenty of changes being made but things are heading in the right direction. For him and his ten place drop, however, it all comes down to strategy. Nakajima says grip was a real problem, but is hopeful the rest of the weekend will see improvements in that area.

Robert Kubica isn't happy with his car. He says: "This was a quite difficult Friday and we lost some running time in the second practice session due to technical problems. The balance of the car was a bit strange and, therefore, it was quite difficult to drive." I love that. A bit strange. Very technical. Heidfeld is just happy that the day was trouble free, although he does say something came loose at the back of the car during the last lap, which is why he returned to the pits rather than taking part in the safety car test.

For Toyota, Trulli put in plenty of laps to collect as much data as possible, although he does say that the heat was changing the track conditions and making things trickier than they needed to be. He says: "The track surface is very dark and it is quickly affected by the sun so it can suddenly become very slippery. You have to prevent that and



figure out what balance you might end up with in the race.” Glock says he has had a difficult start to the weekend, mostly due to the tyres, especially over a short distance, which doesn’t bode well for qualifying.

Sutil had a particularly bad day with some technical problems, mostly involved the brakes but also some overheating tyre problems. He hopes these can be sorted before tomorrow. Fisichella is happy that they’ve made a step forward, but still feels the team are far behind the others, so there’s plenty more still to be done.

In the Red Bull camp, Coulthard says his day was pretty normal, but Webber had a bit of a nightmare, although he can’t narrow down quite what the problem is. “After a very encouraging Barcelona test, it’s suddenly a bit of a mystery here how to get comfortable with the car. But, we’ll work tonight and try to get a better set-up ahead of qualifying tomorrow.”

Massa admits he had a bit of a sore neck today, saying he chose not to run too many long stints to try and take it a bit easy. Still, he finished the day in 2nd so hopefully it’s not too much of a problem. Raikkonen meanwhile, is happy with his day, has ticked everything on his Friday to-do list, and believes they will be very competitive.

Vettel is understandably very happy with his day, saying: “Fifth looks very good, but you never know what fuel loads the others were running, but it’s better than being twentieth!” Bourdais on his home turf, however, wasn’t feeling quite so lucky in 13th. He and Vettel are in agreement that the new car is more competitive, but he says he was on a different programme to his teammate and that explains the variance in their teams.

Hamilton and Kovalainen, in 4th and 7th respectively, had very different days. Hamilton says his excursion into the gravel caused a little bit of damage but nothing major. Kovalainen says the circuit really suits his style and he had a run of the mill day. Hamilton is also the only driver to mention the Safety Car test, saying it still needs some more work.

Last but not least we’ll finish with Honda who were pretty much last but not least. Barrichello says he was expecting better performance, but somehow thinks finishing 19th still means they can be competitive over the weekend. I know that everyone runs different setups in Free Practice, but this seems a little optimistic to me. Button is surprised by their lack of pace, saying he thought they would be challenging for Q3 tomorrow. Like I said, it’s optimistic but I guess we’ll have to wait and see.

If you’re watching Free Practice 3 and Qualifying tomorrow and have access to a computer, you can join us on Sidepodcast.com for the live comment threads. You could be featured on this show, as some of our lovely commenters have been today. If you can’t watch, or you just need a reminder after the event, then F1 Digest will be back tomorrow evening with a full run down of all the action from Saturday. See you then.