



F1 Digest - France Qualifying

Intro

Welcome to F1 Digest, this is the third episode in our France Grand Prix series. We've done a preview, we've looked at Free Practice 1 and 2, now it's time for the third session plus qualifying.

Free Practice 3

There are still rumours floating around that it might rain and even thunder this weekend, but so far we have seen no sign of either. Saturday at Magny-Cours was bright and sunny, with the air temperature at around 24 degrees C, and the track settling around 33. As ever, Force India were the first team to send a car out on track, but they were quickly joined by others, Trulli, Kubica, Alonso and Hamilton. Installation laps were completed by everyone within the first five or ten minutes, and then it was the long wait for the next slice of action.

With 15 minutes of the session gone, Bourdais took to the track in front of his home crowd and posted the first benchmark for the session. He was joined out on track by Force India, Toyota and team mate Vettel, with both Trulli and Glock beating his time. Bourdais claimed the top spot again, but Vettel quickly took it from him. When Raikkonen first hit the track, he went third, whilst Piquet went second, and then quickest on the next lap. Hamilton took a couple of laps, but then he posted the fastest time.

The Red Bull boys were next, with Coulthard going second, and Webber, a few laps later posting sixth. It looked as though there was some ad hoc repair work on Webber's bargeboards, but he seemed to cope with it okay. Scott in Italy left a comment on Sidepodcast.com saying: "Maybe Red Bull only has time to get one car into shape each weekend - until a few weeks ago, it was always Mark's. The tide has turned... Coulthard in 2nd... amazing. He's back."

Surprisingly, Piquet retook the top spot, with Hamilton and Raikkonen unable to improve on their own times. With just over a quarter of the session left to go, the BMW boys were at the bottom of the timesheets, and with ten minutes left, they hit the track. Fast times weren't on the agenda though, unlike Vettel who returned to fourth position. Rich left a thought in the Live Comments, saying: "Considering how weak Nick is at qualifying I would have thought some practice would help - possibly they're saving the tyres." The times were close, and even the soft tyres couldn't make a difference. Drivers put in plenty of personal bests but no one could beat Piquet.

He ended the session fastest, followed by Webber, Vettel, Rosberg and then Raikkonen.

Quali 1

The gap between Free Practice and the start of qualifying saw the air temperature rise slightly to 27 degrees, and the track more so to 42 degrees. Bourdais, Vettel and Fisichella took to the track first, with Vettel taking the top spot of the three. Both Ferrari's and Kovalainen were also out relatively early with Massa ahead of Raikkonen. Kovalainen took the top spot, only for it to be taken by Hamilton who had just joined in the fun. Gaulty commented on Sidepodcast.com: "Kovi seems quick, Hamilton quicker, Massa in between."

Alonso's first lap saw him go fourth, whilst Kubica could only manage 14th. Heidfeld, however, struggled into 18th. He attempted another lap and stayed in 18th, and again on the next lap. Things were not looking good for the BMW, as Kubica improved to only 9th.

Massa went fastest and Raikkonen second, who had been encouraged to attempt another lap as it appeared his first time might have been deleted due to cutting the chicane. Scott clarified this in the Live Comments: "Ooh, Kimi might



get his lap disallowed for having all 4 wheels just off the track.” Steven Roy had another take on it, though, saying: “Ferrari are just playing safe sending Kimi out again. I don’t know if his second fastest lap would have been good enough.”

Kubica shot up to fourth, and on Heidfeld’s final attempt he managed to scrape a lap together and finish 12th. At the end of the session, Massa was fastest, in front of Raikkonen and Trulli, whilst Nakajima, Button, Barrichello, Fisichella and Sutil all missed the cut.

Afterwards, MikeP speculated on the session at Sidepodcast.com, with: “Funny what a difference 2 races can make. From Sutil’s great drive in Monaco, to dead last here.” That’s true, Mike, and also the same can be said of BMW. From a 1-2 win in Canada to struggling through Q1 here in France.

Quali 2

It took a few minutes for the second session to get started, with Bourdais the first man out again. He was joined by Piquet and both Red Bulls. Bourdais posted an initial lap time and as ever, all those out on track managed to beat it. Over on Sidepodcast.com, Rich is disappointed in Bourdais’ performance: “LeSeb is just not making the grade - another highly touted North American racer fails at F1!”

On the soft tyres, Massa and Raikkonen headed the timesheets, in that order, whilst Hamilton sat in third, and Kovalainen popped into eighth. Lady Snowcat picked up on the tyre choices in the comments: “Interesting that the guys are all on softs. Unusual for Q2.”

Considering the poor first session, BMW left it very late to send their guys out for a lap, Kubica’s first attempt saw him eighth, and Heidfeld tenth. Lou commented on Sidepodcast.com: “Quick Nick slower than Piquet!” The Ferraris had retired to the pits figuring they’d done enough to get through, but plenty of others were not safe, and almost everyone was having another go. Kovalainen improved to the top ten, Hamilton third, Trulli fourth, Coulthard in ninth. In the comments, Craig was slightly in awe of Coulthard’s scrappy last lap: “Did DC keep a wheel or two on track at the last corner?”

When the session drew to a close, Massa, Raikkonen and Hamilton sat at the top, whilst we lost Piquet, Vettel, Bourdais, Rosberg and Heidfeld.

Quali 3

Considering how short the third session is, it’s surprising that over a minute passed before anyone decided to leave the pit lane. Glock was first out with Webber and Trulli close behind him. It was a messy few laps, as Glock ran wide, then Trulli spun which compromised Webber. This allowed others to steam ahead – Alonso in third, with Kovalainen fourth. However, Rich came to the defence of Glock, saying: “Who would have thought he would be the best German driver today?”

Massa posted an early benchmark for pole, only to be beaten by Raikkonen. Hamilton looked to be on a charge, but made a small mistake and ended up sixth. Next time round Massa stayed in second, and Raikkonen realised that he wasn’t about to lose his pole position so he returned to the pit lane. Hamilton posted the third fastest time, unable to jump either Ferrari, but managing to get ahead of Alonso.

The final finishing order was Raikkonen, Massa, Hamilton, Alonso, Trulli, Kovalainen, Kubica, Webber, Coulthard and Glock.

With their penalties, Hamilton starts from 13th and Rosberg at the back. Kovalainen was also given a penalty for holding up Webber on a flying lap, which sees him demoted five places to tenth. After qualifying was over, Todd left



a thought on Sidepodcast.com: “With Hamilton deep in the mid pack I don’t think there is any way he will survive the start of the race!” And Stuart was at the circuit, and gave us a couple of snippets, saying: “The news from here is that Webber is probably fairly heavy and that Fernando wasn’t especially light, so his lap wasn’t a low-fuel special.”

Conclusions

McLaren appear to have everything stacked against them this weekend. Hamilton was already ten places down, and now Kovalainen has his five place drop to deal with. Hamilton is disappointed with his performance in qualifying, and apologises to the team for some of the errors he made, but promises to push hard during the race. Of the incident with Webber, Kovalainen says: “Owing to the penalty I was given following the mix-up with two other cars, I will start 10th; not ideal, but it’s perfectly possible to score points from there and that’s what I intend to do.”

Ferrari had a good day today, and Raikkonen is happy to have been the one to get Ferrari’s 200th pole position. He’s feeling confident about the race, and thinks they’ve got a good balance on the car here in France. Massa, meanwhile, says: “I am happy that the team recorded its two hundredth pole position today and it’s an honour for me to have made a small contribution to this milestone.” Ah, yes, Massa, but not when it really matters, eh?

Honda are extremely disappointed with their day. Button said he had a good car, but his last run was ruined. “My last run was slow as I was called into the weighbridge and then had to wait in the pit box as there was not enough time to go back into the garage before my final run.” This gave him tyre issues, but he does say he doubts they could have got any further anyway. Barrichello agrees saying the car just isn’t performing.

Piquet did pretty well to finish in 11th, saying: “It’s frustrating to miss out on Q3, but we didn’t anticipate the behaviour of the soft tyres which turned out to be slower than we thought.” Piquet is in a great position, though, as he finished qualifying in 11th, and was thus able to choose whatever fuel load he wants, but then other grid penalties promote him into 9th. Alonso is starting a net third, so he’s happy with the constant improvements with their car.

Another team doing better than expected is Red Bull, with Mark Webber saying he did okay despite Trulli spinning and the Kovalainen incident, and Coulthard happy with his performance considering his fuel load. He reckons it will be a tight competition tomorrow.

BMW, meanwhile, are obviously having a harder time than they were expecting. Kubica isn’t happy with his car setup and thinks the other teams have made progress where BMW haven’t. Heidfeld says: “The circuit here in Magny-Cours is completely different to the one in Montreal, and right from the beginning of the weekend here we were not so good as we have been recently. But still we were hoping for a better qualifying.”

Glock says any differences in his performance related to Trulli were to do with fuel loads, but Trulli sums up the day for Toyota nicely. “That was a great qualifying session so I’m really pleased both for myself and for the team to get two cars into the top ten. I didn’t expect to be so quick but I’ve been building up to this all weekend. The car was well balanced and everything went well, particularly my last lap.”

Rosberg is starting last and having qualifying 15th, he knows it’s going to be a tough race. He said: “Getting a decent result from P15 would be difficult enough but, with the ten-place penalty, it’s going to be even harder.” Nakajima was out in Quali 1, so he’s also having to work extra hard this weekend. Patrick Head tells us how it is, saying: “A very disappointing qualifying for us today. It’s obviously that the car isn’t strong here, but equally we didn’t get the best out of it this afternoon.”

For Toro Rosso, it’s a case of so near and yet so far. Vettel says: “I came very near to making Q3 and although I can’t say I’m angry, when you get so close it is disappointing not to have done it. My laps were not perfect but they were



pretty good.” Bourdais pinpoints the problem on the fact that the grid is just so tight, and the smallest mistake or problem with the car can make the difference of several places out on track.

Finally, Force India. If it weren’t for Rosberg, they would be last, but Sutil remains optimistic. “We need to improve so that’s why we’re at the back of the grid for now. We know though that our race pace is good compared to the others and we can stay with them, so now we need to concentrate on getting to the end of the race and having a good finish.” Fisichella agrees, but says he had a difficult session and they are both suffering with some understeer issues, especially in the hot weather. He, along with many of the grid, and perhaps some of the fans, will be hoping for rain tomorrow.

That’s it for today, thanks for listening. If you want to be featured on this show, or if you’d just like a place to hang out and chat during the race, visit Sidepodcast.com for the Live Commenting. I will be back tomorrow with details of all the action.

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