



F1 Digest - Europe Free Practice

Intro

This is F1 Digest from Sidepodcast – your race coverage featuring all the sessions over the entire race weekend. Today we're looking at Free Practice 1 and 2 for the European Grand Prix.

Free Practice 1

I'm not sure there has been a session so highly anticipated, except perhaps the season opener in Australia. We were all looking forward to seeing the new track, and how our drivers would fare on it. That's why it's quite irritating that ITV wasn't working for at least half of the first session. Still, we managed to get by and this is how Free Practice 1 went.

Kubica led the way, followed by almost everyone else intent on setting an installation lap. Only Button and both Ferrari's left the track to everyone else, and we had to wait for the usual interminable length of time while nothing happened. We weren't expecting this, in the Live Comments on Sidepodcast.com, Scott said: "The session's not going quite as we expected/hoped, in terms of on-track action." Scott also had a great insight into driver's preparations: "Some drivers have been putting in more effort learning the track than others, though. Alonso has been putting in the laps in Nick Wirth's simulator (at a cost of €7,500 per day) which offers up to 95% realism, apparently. Raikkonen, on the other hand, has been at home watching the Olympics on TV."

Fifteen minutes went past and eventually it was Bourdais who broke cover and took to the track, joined by Vettel. The pair jostled for position, whilst being joined by Alonso and then the Ferrari boys. Bourdais managed to stay at the top despite flying attempts from Raikkonen. As more and more cars hit the track, the Ferrari eventually managed to top the times. Massa made it a 1-2.

Glock pushed into P2, and Trulli third, whilst Hamilton had a go at his own flying lap. Glock then improved to take the top spot, although spun moments later. Then it was McLaren's turn to post a 1-2, and next should have been BMW's turn. Kubica posted the fastest time, but Heidfeld let the side down struggling below the top ten.

It didn't last long for Kubica though, as Raikkonen stole the top spot, and went even quicker the next time round. Towards the bottom of the timesheets, neither Red Bull driver seemed to be having a particularly easy morning. Out of nowhere Vettel went quickest, and far from being a fluke, his team mate Bourdais slipped into third. Massa briefly took the top spot, but Vettel stole it right back again, finishing the session on top. Lou left a thought on Sidepodcast.com: "Wow, I don't think Toro Rosso could have shown up Red bull any more. A Toro Rosso first and Red Bull last... oops!!!" The final fastest five were Vettel, Massa, Hamilton, Bourdais and Kovalainen.

Free Practice 2

Between the two sessions, things brightened up, and the track temperature hit 42 degrees C, whilst the air settled on 30. Fisichella was the first man out on track, but he was soon followed by six others. Bourdais was setting an early benchmark, battling with Alonso for the top spot.

During the early laps, we saw some footage of a man on the track, being shooed away by security. Not a good start for the profile of the Valencian track. Nevertheless, the session continued undisturbed. Alianora commented on Sidepodcast.com: "Guy being marshalled away from the track there - not great if they're still having trouble with enthusiastic spectators invading the track."



After about ten minutes, all but Raikkonen and both Red Bull drivers had taken to the track. Hamilton was fastest, with Massa in third, and unbelievably Sutil was in fourth. On his first attempt at a lap, Raikkonen went second. The Red Bulls still did not surface. Scott in Italy noted on the Live Comments: "Webber looking a little impatient but still calm. Just standing around waiting for a decent car. Story of his life..."

When Webber did emerge from the pit lane, he was minding his own business around the track when he was almost hit by Rosberg. The Williams had lost control and was sliding off track, and Webber managed to see and avoid him just in time. On Sidepodcast.com, SteveintheUK commented: "So drivers do actually use they mirrors sometimes then. That would have been a big crash if the driver in front hadn't pulled over to the side so I'm guessing that wasn't DC in front though."

Meanwhile, at the top, it was a battle between Massa, Hamilton and Raikkonen. Just as in the first session, as if out of nowhere, a car slipped into the top spot. This time it was Alonso, so it's understandable that he would want to grab a headline or two. Raikkonen denied him the glory though, by stealing the fastest time at the very last minute. Amazingly, Button, who had been hovering towards the lower end of the timesheets all day squeezed into third. Utterly bizarre.

The fastest five at the end of the day were Raikkonen, Alonso, Button, Massa and Hamilton.

Conclusions

It's hard to know what to make of today. The times were nowhere near as fast as we were expecting, but whether the drivers were taking it easy to learn the track, or the laptimes predictions were wrong, we don't know. The timesheets were topsy turvy and it's hard to know if we learned anything. But more importantly, let's see if the drivers did.

Rosberg believes the track will suit their car, although with the difference in track conditions from the beginning of a session to the end, he thinks it's hard to tell for sure. Nakajima agrees, saying: "The sessions went well for us. The long runs were good but we need to find a bit more pace when we're out on new tyres."

Webber sums up the day for Red Bull: "First of all, they've done a great job with the track and it's a fantastic facility to drive, so that's good. We're not as quick as we'd like to be and we've still got a bit of work to do. The first session was very testing, but we improved the car in the second and we've got a lot of data to go through tonight to get ourselves a good grid position tomorrow. Coulthard agrees, saying simply: "The track's good."

For Toyota, Glock says it was hot, and the track was very dusty, but it was nothing unexpected. Trulli believes he didn't get the balance of his car right, and explains why it's tricky on a street circuit: "You need to find a compromise on setup because there is a mix of slow corners and higher-speed sections with long straights. The most important thing is how much the surface will change during the weekend. The asphalt is quite smooth and while it was predictably slippery today, the grip should improve so it will be hard to get the setup right."

Despite finishing second at the end of the day, Alonso is realistic about how the team will do over the weekend, and says he is just glad he completed the programme for the day and got all the data needed. Piquet says the same, believing he got the maximum out of the three hours allowed today. Director of Engineering Pat Symonds said: "As expected, the grip level was very low to begin with and developed through both sessions. It is difficult to understand too much about our situation relative to the others, but we had no significant problems, which is encouraging for the rest of the weekend."

Someone else who must be feeling realistic despite finishing in the top three is Button. He says: "The track is very dusty and if you go offline, your tyres are quickly covered in dirt, which makes it difficult to be consistent. We made



a lot of changes to the car this afternoon which have proved positive and provided a great deal of useful information to study this evening. It was nice to do a quick lap at the end on the option tyre. Hopefully we can further improve the car overnight and be reasonably competitive for qualifying tomorrow." Meanwhile, teammate Barrichello finished the day down in 20th, and puts it down to changing some parts for the afternoon session that then screwed up the balance of the car and caused some braking issues.

Despite being a brand new circuit, Sutil feels at home there: "Everything was really as normal, with a standard programme with the tyres. We have some issues with graining as usual, but overall I am quite pleased with the day. The seamless shift is a very good step and I was happy with the progress." Fisichella agrees that the gearbox is good, the second session was better than the first and the track is nice to drive.

Raikkonen approves of the new track: "I like driving this track: it is different to other street circuits we have known. Yesterday, when I walked the track, I thought it would be fun and today confirmed that impression. There are some very quick parts and almost everywhere there's a lot of room." And Massa also liked his day: "They were two enjoyable sessions with the lap times tumbling bit by bit as the drivers lapped and got confidence in the track layout. The track surface is still very dirty and it is easy to make mistakes which can lose you precious tenths and to do a good lap time you have to be perfect."

So, apparently both BMW boys also like the track. Are you seeing a pattern here? Although it's a brand new circuit and there should be hundreds of things they could tell us, we're getting the same thing from everyone. The first session was dusty, the second was better, the track is great, and we can't wait for tomorrow.

At last, Toro Rosso have some interesting insights. Vettel says that although we think the track looks like Canada, it's actually quite different, with some much trickier corners. Wait a minute, I've just discovered Bourdais' quotes, and there's a scathing attack on the layout of the track. Well, compared to everyone else's, he says: "The track is quite nice and I think they have done a good job with the design at their first attempt." Ouch. Also, he says: "Let's see what happens when we go to the next step tomorrow afternoon and empty the fuel tank." Which is interesting, because is he intimating that they weren't running on empty when he finished third?

We finish up with McLaren, with Hamilton happy with his day but slightly annoyed at the amount of traffic in the second session. Apparently they hindered them confirming their setup changes, but he's still pretty confident for tomorrow. Kovalainen also says they made several good changes to the car throughout the day and by the end the balance was good. I'm also fascinated by Ron Dennis' thought that: "Lewis and Heikki also performed faultlessly..." I don't want to take anything away from the McLaren boys, but I'm sure I saw the odd off-track excursion. Still, as long as they're keeping the boss happy, that's all that matters.

That's it for today, thanks for everyone who participated in Live Commenting today, and if you didn't get a chance to, maybe see if you can visit Sidepodcast.com during one of the sessions tomorrow. I will be back with a full rundown of the action from FP3 and qualifying tomorrow night.