



F1 Digest - Europe Qualifying

Intro

Welcome to F1 Digest for the European Grand Prix weekend. We've already had a look at Free Practice 1 and 2, and now it's time to catch up with the action from Saturday.

Free Practice 3

Saturday was a lot cooler than Friday, with the air temperature at about 26 degrees C, and the track only a couple of degrees more. Many cars hit the track for the initial installation lap, despite the fact that there was some oil on the track – from an unknown source. Sutil was the first to post a lap time, and he was soon joined by his team mate, Piquet and Massa in the Ferrari. Massa put in an early fast time, of the four that's not surprising, but when Raikkonen hit the track, he could only manage fourth.

The Renault drivers were lapping really slowly, just like they did in Hungary, with Alonso's first lap time coming in at over 2 minutes. Steven Roy commented on Sidepodcast.com: "It looks like Renault are planning to do the same as they did in Hungary and scrub all their race tyres by doing laps 15-20 seconds slower than race pace. How can they be allowed to run that slowly?" The answer is, we don't know. It seems really unusual for a dangerous practice to be allowed to continue, especially at an unknown track.

Things started to get very busy, Hamilton went out for an installation lap, Heidfeld slipped into fourth, whilst Kubica went quickest. The BMW was knocked down by Vettel in the Toro Rosso with Bourdais jumping to third. With just over half the session gone, Trulli was the only driver not to have posted a lap time, and he looked to be having IX gearbox issues – waiting patiently in the garage for his car to be fixed. He was missing out on the fun, as driver after driver seemed to struggle coming to the right hander off the bridge. It's a good job there's lots of run off there or we would have seen a lot of incidents.

Hamilton was one such driver who struggled round that corner, meaning his first flying lap saw him 18th, but he improved to third, whilst Bourdais and Vettel squabbled over the top spot. Bourdais had sneaked into first after complaining about almost everything on his car, and the tactic also worked for Piquet who improved from the bottom of the grid to the top. In the Live Comments, Lou said: "Nelson fastest, Alonso last. Oh dear. If I were in Renault I would run for cover.... Alonso is not going to be happy..."

In the dying moments of the session, Kubica snuck in the fastest lap, the first driver to post a 1:38 so far in the weekend. The fastest five at the end of FP3 were Kubica, Rosberg, Bourdais, Nakajima and Massa. Notably, Trulli didn't set a lap time and only completed two laps. At the end of the session, Jeremy commented: "It feels like the beginning of the season all over again - a long break and not knowing who's going to be quick!"

Quali 1

Things warmed up slightly before qualifying, and the sun did come out but it wasn't as hot as we thought it might have been. Piquet was the first man out for the first session, closely followed by Trulli, obviously keen to make up for his lost track time this morning. Piquet was beginning his first lap, and managed to hit a bird, but it didn't seem affect him too much.

Of course, he lost his initial benchmark to Kubica, and then Hamilton. Massa's first lap only saw him in sixth, and Raikkonen, who has confessed to having qualifying troubles, knocked him down a spot. Scott Woodwiss commented on Sidepodcast.com: "Ferrari's either not looking on the pace at the moment, or they're just sandbagging for Q3."



The Toro Rosso boys continued their strong form with Bourdais going second and Vettel third. Alonso then pleased the crowd by zipping into second, Rosberg went first, beaten then by Glock.

For the last ditch effort at a flying lap, everyone bar the McLaren boys hit the track. Glock appeared to get in the way of Heidfeld, which led to the BMW running wide. Vettel posted the fastest time but was just pipped to the top by Trulli. At the end of the session, the fastest three were Trulli, Vettel and Massa, and we lost Button, Coulthard, Fisichella, Barrichello and Sutil. Rocket left a thought in the Live Comments: "This has got to be the most fascinating Q1 of the year. I don't know where to look, or what to do for that matter. I might have to have a bit of a lie down before Q2."

Quali 2

In the last few moments of the first session and at the beginning of the second, it looked like it might start to rain. Drops were spotted on the cameras, and Kimi Raikkonen played it safe by heading out first. He was joined by Massa, the BMWs and the Toro Rosso's.

Raikkonen went fastest, then Kubica beat him, then Vettel topped them all. Hamilton slipped into third, and Trulli, amazingly fast considering his lack of preparation, jumped into second. Team mate Glock sat back well out of the top ten.

Massa's next lap saw him second, whilst Raikkonen had fallen to seventh, and couldn't improve on his time. In fact, no one really managed to improve and the end of the session saw Vettel lead Massa and Heidfeld. Dropping out was Nakajima, Alonso, Glock, Webber and Piquet. Jordan Allen commented on Sidepodcast.com: "If an STR is on pole, Ferrari is going to stop delivering engines immediately." But on the subject of a Toro Rosso on pole, Bassanoclapper, if I said that right, commented: "Would be nice, but I doubt it."

Quali 3

The final ten minutes to go for pole, then, with Trulli out first, followed by the Toro Rosso drivers, and then everyone else. All ten cars on track, but the lap is so enormous that traffic never seemed to be a problem. Next was a great moment, as Vettel posted P1, then Hamilton beat it, then Raikkonen pipped him, then Massa topped them all.

A quick dash to the pits for the final tyre choice, and then out for a last flying lap. The last few minutes were more manic than we've seen a while, with Hamilton going fastest, momentarily, before Massa rounded the last corner and grabbed pole position. In the comments, Dom broke out the caps lock to celebrate with Massa: "MASSA ON POLE. WOOOOOOOOOO!" Whilst Gary Shavit sympathised for another driver: "Vettel messes up S2. What a shame."

Massa lines up first on the grid followed by Hamilton, Kubica, Raikkonen, Kovalainen, Vettel, Trulli, Heidfeld, Rosberg and Bourdais.

Conclusions

Let's start with Button who says he's particularly disappointed with his qualifying performance, and says it was all about the tyres: "My first run on the prime tyres was good but we simply chose the wrong one for my final run in Q1. I had no grip with the option and it just wasn't very competitive for us." Barrichello was also struggling with problem tyres meaning he couldn't give the lap his all. Both drivers are sad to start the first race at this circuit from so far back on the grid.

Alonso was hoping to be higher up as well, at his second home race of the season. For tomorrow, he says: "The race will therefore be more difficult, but, as we are on a street course, anything is possible. We must continue working



hard this evening to try and work out the best strategy that will allow us to be ready for all eventualities tomorrow, such as a safety car period, which seems quite likely.” Piquet believes that the qualifying results for Renault don’t really show the true pace, so hopefully we will see more of that in the race.

From two disappointed teams to the joys of Ferrari, Massa is understandably happy but after Hungary is very aware of how long the race will be. Raikkonen isn’t impressed with his position, though: “Fourth place is not what I was looking for, but it’s definitely not the end of the world. I could have been higher up the grid but on my last run in Q3, I locked the wheels at a few points and lost valuable time: it was nothing dramatic, but at this circuit, a small error is very costly.”

Force India still haven’t been able to get into the second session of qualifying, despite the new seamless shift gearbox. Sutil says he made some small mistakes, suffered with traffic and couldn’t warm up his tyres. Fisichella looks on the bright side saying: “In the end we are only 1.3secs from the fastest time of the session. It just shows how close everything is now, but I don’t think we could have done anything more.”

Trulli is understandably okay with finishing 7th after the issues he faced today with the circuit: “We had a gearbox oil pump problem this morning that meant I could not try it out. So in a way I was driving blind this afternoon but I used my experience, I concentrated very hard and I made it through into Q3. I made a mistake on my last run but I am still very happy with what we achieved today.” Glock isn’t sure where his times went wrong but thinks he could have got higher than 13th. He says it was a difficult qualifying all round and mentions that he wasn’t well overnight, but says that is no excuse.

Hamilton is confident with the car and says he felt very comfortable around the track, although he knows where his weakness is. “Second place on the grid is a good basis for tomorrow’s race. However, Felipe Massa was significantly faster in the first sector, and I hope we’ll be able to improve there tomorrow.” I’m not sure of the use of ‘we’ there, because there’s only one man behind the wheel, but if anybody can do it, Hamilton can. Kovalainen agrees that the balance of the car was good, but is disappointed with his fifth place.

Webber can see how good the race is shaping up to be, saying: “It’s a new venue here, which brings variety to the positions.” Unfortunately for Webber, Red Bull are at the wrong end of that. He continues: “We’ve struggled for speed for most of the weekend. There were a few laps I was pleased with, but we didn’t make it through to Q3.” As ever, although he said more, Coulthard managed to sum up his day in one sentence: “That was probably one of my messiest sessions and I’m disappointed.”

Rosberg thinks Williams are back on the way up. He begins: “It’s been a few races since we managed to get into the top ten, so this is a good result for us. We’d obviously always want to do better, but this shows we’ve made a step in the right direction and that’s satisfying.” Nakajima says it was a good qualifying, and although he’s disappointed to have missed Q3, he’s happy that 11th has its benefits on the grid.

For BMW, Heidfeld was worried when he saw himself staring at a Toyota: “In Q1 I thought it was déjà-vu when Timo Glock was in my way. Our team informs us on the radio how many seconds behind us a fast car is, and when we have to let somebody overtake. Apparently this isn’t the case in every team. I was afraid my qualifying would be ruined, but luckily I was able to do a second lap straight away and it was good enough.” He’s relatively satisfied with 8th. Kubica is happy to start from 3rd, and feels comfortable in the car, although he’s slightly concerned about the speed gap between them, and Ferrari and McLaren.

For the first time this season, Toro Rosso managed to get both cars into the top ten and it’s a best qualifying slot for both drivers. Vettel is happy with his day, saying: We didn’t expect to do this well here but it’s a good thing to have both cars in Q3. Now we have to keep our feet on the ground, because there are a lot of laps ahead of us



tomorrow.” Bourdais isn’t quite as pleased: “This wasn’t bad. I am still having my problem of not finding grip on the option tyre so we need to work on that. What we have seen here is that, on a new track, some teams have worked in the right direction and some have not. The team did a good job of giving me a car that was one of the best today. Now it is up to me to get the most out of it in the race.” My favourite quote of the day comes from technical director Giorgio Ascanelli: “We must be doing something right but I’m not sure what it is!”

That wraps up our coverage of Free Practice 3 and Qualifying. Tomorrow we will see what happens during the race, so join me on Sidepodcast.com for live commenting if you can, and if not, I’ll see you back here tomorrow for the full F1 Digest round up. See you then.

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