



F1 Digest - Belgium Qualifying

Intro

You're listening to F1 Digest from Sidepodcast. After a damp Friday in Belgium yesterday, we were all eagerly anticipating qualifying. It wasn't as super exciting as I'd hoped, but certainly worth reviewing. Here's what happened on Saturday at Spa.

Free Practice 3

There was a lot more rain overnight, and the damp track meant the session was declared wet. The air and track temperature were very cool at 16 degrees C.

The Force India's were out first but it was installation laps for everybody soon afterwards. Button didn't make it very far from the pit lane before he slowed and pulled off to the side of the track. The Honda had a fuel pump problem, and Button had to sit out and watch the rest of the session.

Ten minutes in and Heidfeld was the first to go out for a lap, followed by Bourdais, and as the pair set their first times – Bourdais ahead – it started to rain lightly. Many others joined the traffic with intermediate tyres on, Sutil, Vettel, Glock and both Renault drivers all got a time on the board. Glock went quickest, then Piquet pushed him down, then Webber topped them all momentarily, before Glock took it right back again. On Sidepodcast.com, Dank is a Webber fan and said: "I hope for Webber it absolutely tips it down tomorrow and levels out the playing field a bit. I'll remind him to keep away from the white lines as I wouldn't like a repeat of the Becketts incident from Silverstone!"

Glock, Vettel and Nakajima were all squabbling for the top spot before Raikkonen – the first of the top runners – emerged from the pit lane. The Ferrari didn't have an easy time, messing up in two places and ruining a couple of laps. Meanwhile, Bourdais jumped to the top of the timesheets.

BG was getting a bit worried about Ron's team in the comments, saying: "I wonder what's with the McLarens? Will they completely skip this practice session or what?" Thankfully, Hamilton came out for his first full lap with just over ten minutes left to go, and he immediately jumped into P1, whilst Kovalainen's first lap saw him in 15th. Not great but not that bad when you consider that Raikkonen was just behind him in 16th.

With just 8 minutes to go, Massa came out for his first taste of Free Practice 3, and a couple of minutes later set his first flying lap in 8th. With a last few ditch efforts at a fast lap, the session ended with Heidfeld on top, followed by Kovalainen, Alonso, Hamilton and then Massa. Jeremy summed things up for us in the comments: "If I was driving for any team other than Ferrari or McLaren, I would be depressed right now."

Quali 1

Temperatures only warmed a couple of degrees before qualifying began, but the rain held off and was expected to do so for the remainder of the day.

Piquet was the first man out, but as is the norm, both Force India boys were not far behind. Most of the drivers were out quite early, with Glock going fastest, then Massa beating him, then Hamilton blowing them all out of the water. Raikkonen managed to slip into second, trying his best to match team mate Massa's pace. Flibster left a comment on Sidepodcast.com: "That was a superb lap by Hamilton. Toro Rosso have certainly stepped up. Makes me wonder what the Red Bull would do with a Mercedes or Ferrari engine in the back."



Nakajima was really struggling, stuck at the bottom of the timesheets along with the Honda's. Conversely Rosberg was into the top ten for this session. As the minutes ticked away, we were watching Sutil, who managed a brilliant lap to go 14th. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to see him into the next session, as Webber managed to haul himself into eighth.

At the very end of the session Bourdais managed to pull out the fastest lap to go top, ahead of Kovalainen and Massa. Dropping out was Barrichello, Button, Sutil, Nakajima, and Fisichella. Jon Walldock summed up what the entire world was thinking with some nicely placed capital letters on Sidepodcast.com: "HOW ON EARTH DID BOURDAIS DO THAT!!" However, Felipe Leite thought he might have a solution: "I believe Bourdais was the only one on soft tyres.... is this right?"

Quali 2

The second session saw Raikkonen out first, and he was soon followed by everyone but both BMW drivers. Raikkonen obviously put in the first benchmark, the fastest time of the weekend so far, but he was soon pushed down by both McLaren's, Kovalainen in front. Alonso had a moment on the grass, but still managed to slip into fourth, until Massa took that place from him.

When the BMWs finally hit the track, Kubica went sixth, and Heidfeld managed fourth. There was the obligatory dive into the pit lane for any last setup tweaks before everyone bundled out on track for their last flying lap of the session. Vettel was in seventh, and was knocked down by his team mate Bourdais – the second race in a row that they've both got through to Q3.

The fastest three in the session were Kovalainen, Hamilton and Raikkonen, and we lost Trulli, Piquet, Glock, Coulthard and Rosberg.

Quali 3

The final session began with Massa heading out first, leading everyone but Vettel. Massa made a mistake right at the end of his lap, meaning his initial time was easily beaten by Raikkonen, but both of them were pushed down by a storming Hamilton. Heidfeld also managed to get in ahead of Massa on the first round of laps.

The final dash for pole saw Massa take the top spot briefly, but Hamilton was so fast we knew he had pole about halfway round the lap. Meanwhile, RG was watching the battle between the BMWs, and commented: "5th and 8th, only the second time this season Nick has outqualified Robert. Well, gotta hope for some points today!" Alenyaa was less happy: "Kub did another run there. Still only 8th though, hope he's heavy, or I'll kick him from my Fantasy Racers team!"

The final grid lineup for tomorrow's race is Hamilton, Massa, Kovalainen, Heidfeld, Alonso, Webber, Kubica, Bourdais and Vettel.

Conclusions

Today we're starting towards the bottom of the grid with Honda. Unfortunately, Barrichello is in 16th and says he is pleased with what the team achieved today, relatively speaking, of course. He said everyone is working hard, and it's a shame the car isn't competitive. Button is also looking on the optimistic side of things: "My first lap in Qualifying was the first lap that I did today so in a way it was nice to be able to beat some of our competitors and be close to my team-mate. It was a decent session for us, at the level of performance which the car is showing this weekend, and we will at least be starting from the clean side of the grid. Rain tomorrow would make the race more interesting but unfortunately it's not looking likely."

Trulli starts 11th on the grid, and knows that it can be helpful from a strategy point of view, but he's not happy. "We knew we would be struggling a bit today given these low temperatures and it was a difficult qualifying for us - this has been the trend of the weekend so far unfortunately. It was very hard to get the temperature into the tyres in order to make them work properly so it is then not easy to judge the car balance." Glock also said the tyres were a serious issue, and he is hoping for rain tomorrow.

For Williams, Rosberg finished the day in 15th and Nakajima in 19th. Kazuki says: "I felt our car was better in practice this morning despite the fact that the dry conditions for qualifying made the circuit better this afternoon." Rosberg also found it a tough day: "I didn't really expect us to struggle so much in qualifying today. While we knew that Spa was not going to be our best track, being this far back is unexpected and very disappointing."

Here are the few words that Coulthard shares: "I'm not so happy with that. Fourteenth doesn't look good, but it's so tight in the mid field and we're separated by such a small margin. Let's see what we can do tomorrow." Webber admits that it was enough of a stress getting into Q3 so 7th is okay, but it will all come down to strategy tomorrow. Heidfeld must be happy with his 5th place, but he keeps it under control in the quotes, saying the weekend is going well so far, and that solutions they implemented a few weeks ago are finally coming to fruition. Kubica felt like qualifying was very difficult and that the car was lacking grip.

Force India so almost got into Q2 that it was painful. Sutil is still happy though: "It was a very close qualifying today, with seven hundredths to the two Hondas and also very close to 16th place. I think we expected to be at this pace and we can be quite happy with the performance. We knew that Honda would be our closest competitor and it was close. We know we have a fast car on the straights here and I think we can do some overtaking and have a good race tomorrow." Fisichella says he lost control of the car in at least three places during one of his laps, and he also suffered with traffic today, but like Sutil, hopes they might get some overtaking done tomorrow.

Alonso is satisfied with his position, saying: "We know that in normal conditions it's very difficult to finish in the top four and that to finish in fifth or sixth place is a good result. So that means that we have done a solid job today." Piquet feels disappointed that he didn't get into the top ten, but the team are happy that it was only by the smallest of margins.

Massa is pretty comfortable with what he put into the session today: "I did a great lap, but it was not enough to be on pole position. Today, we lacked a bit of speed compared to our main rivals but the race is very long and, over a distance, we know we can be very competitive and therefore we are capable of fighting for the win." He also said that if it rains the whole thing will be a lottery anyway. Raikkonen says the car is okay, and that he made a mistake on his final lap in qualifying which cost him several places on the grid.

For Toro Rosso, Bourdais had a good day: "A couple of tenths is all that separated us from sixth or seventh. It's beginning to come together and it's been a good weekend so far. I feel this track and its corners suit me better. It was nice to see my name at the top of a time sheet in Q1. It's been a long time!" Vettel also thinks they had a strong day, and explains the third session of qualifying for us: "I messed up my last run a bit but it didn't affect the result in the end. I think we have a good strategy for both cars so let's see what happens. At the moment, I'm starting on the dirty side of the track but if it rains for the race it becomes the clean side."

Hamilton takes pole position and said that he's very comfortable with the car and the track, and feels like he didn't make any mistakes, bar a couple of wheel lockups. Kovalainen also says he didn't make any mistakes on the lap that saw him in third, and feels like the day was pretty straightforward for the team. I'm sure he's hoping he can say the same tomorrow.



That's it for today. The race should be interesting, even if it doesn't rain, and I hope you can join us in the live comments on Sidepodcast.com during the Grand Prix. If not, leave your thoughts on our voicemail at 0121 28 87225. I look forward to hearing from you.

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