



F1 Digest - Italy Free Practice

Intro

This is F1 Digest and we're right in the middle of the Italian Grand Prix weekend. This is the second of four shows, where we'll look at all the sessions in detail, but today it's time for a Free Practice roundup.

Free Practice 1

From the damp climate in Belgium we move on to the damp climate of Monza, and FP1 was declared a wet session. The track was still suffering from overnight showers, but the morning session started with the track temperature at about 20 degrees C, and the air a couple of degrees higher.

Fisichella hit the track first, and in the live comments, Scott Woodwiss used the Force India to judge the state of the circuit: "Even at cruising speed, Fisi gets the back end out? Hmm, is there actually some moisture on the track? Judging by the rooster tail there, I'd say yes." Fisichella headed up the installation laps, and after a few minutes all but the Ferrari's and Barrichello had been out for a taste of the circuit. Race Control announced that rain was expected within ten minutes, so Sutil quickly went back out on track, followed by Fisichella, the pair keen to get some running in before the weather turned. They returned to the pits, and Barrichello had a go, and after a couple of solo laps by the Honda, it started to rain. The others, joining him on track, soon felt the effects of the shower, as Nakajima took a quick trip through the air as he ran off into the gravel.

Things went very slowly, so we were left looking at the cars in more detail. In the comments, Rocket said: "Just copped a look at the rear spoiler of the Honda, it really is JUST there, isn't it, for this track." Force India sent both their cars out for a couple of laps, then they returned to the pit lane. Button had a go, then returned. Bourdais also tried the track, and found staying on the tarmac difficult. Toyota sent out their drivers, to be joined by Rosberg and Fisichella.

At this point, Sutil was at the top of the timesheets, having set the fastest time when the track was slightly drier. The action continued at this pace, with a couple of cars venturing out at a time, but conditions were worsening. Flibster noted on Sidepodcast.com: "It's seriously dark out there now." Raikkonen could only manage to creep into 8th, and Massa missed out a chicane to take 13th.

With 15 minutes left, the rain really, really started to pour, monsoon-style and there was no action on track. Dank in the Live Comments put it: "It's absolutely tipping it down!" Everyone was in the pits, but it wasn't much safer in there, as the garages were actually flooding. Mechanics were left investigating the drains and sweeping the water out with brooms. Alianora said on Sidepodcast.com: "Note: Using a broom as a bailing device will not suffice..."

The rain became so hard, that with just five minutes left, the session was red-flagged, leaving Sutil as the fastest man, ahead of Barrichello, Fisichella, Glock and Rosberg. Not only were we left with a bizarre top of the timesheets list, but six drivers didn't even manage to set a lap time.

Free Practice 2

The other formula sessions between FP1 and 2 were delayed, or shortened, so that the track could recover from the wet weather. By the time it was all about Formula 1 again, the track was drying, and the sun had come out. The session was still declared wet, though, despite air and track temperatures just over 20 degrees C.



Kovalainen went out first, and it wasn't all about installation laps now, as he went straight on to set a flying lap time. He was one of those who didn't set a time in FP1, though, so no doubt he wanted to get the practice in. He was joined by some others, Bourdais and Webber, Rosberg and Vettel, with Bourdais battling Kovalainen for the top spot. Alianora noted in the Live Comments the lack of a certain team: "We may not see much of Force India this part of the session, because of the wet tyre limit." And Steven Roy shared his thoughts: "I didn't realise there was a limit on wets. 4 sets. That is insane."

Massa and Raikkonen hit the track, with the Finn taking P1. The chicanes appeared to be causing issues with the damp track, as first Vettel and then Barrichello struggled to get through a lap cleanly.

Bourdais hit the top spot again, until Glock took it momentarily, before Vettel proved that Toro Rosso are still on fighting form. Button then went fastest, whilst Hamilton's first lap saw him in 8th. The McLaren improved to second and then first. Neil noticed on Sidepodcast.com: "Watching on board out of chicane 1, Hamilton is so much more confident on power than even the Ferrari's."

The times began to tumble, with improvements all round. Kubica went 2nd, Raikkonen fastest, then Massa even faster. With half an hour to go, yet another leader slipped into P1, this time Kubica. Moments later, he spun and ended up facing into the oncoming path of a Toyota. Both escaped unharmed.

Piquet spun going into a chicane, and was facing the wrong way on the circuit. In trying to get his car back on track, he got beached on the kerbs and had to submit to the tractor. Alianora was listening to the radio transmission between the car and the team: "Piquet Jr made it sound like Renault's get beached on kerbs every day of the week." And Dirty Scarab added: "So he's balancing on his plank, bless him."

As the last five minutes rolled around, everyone was out on track – minus Piquet – and with improvements taken into account, Raikkonen posted the fastest time. He ended the session ahead of Kubica, Heidfeld, Hamilton and Rosberg. The teams took part in a practice safety car test, and then returned to the pit lane. All but Sutil, that is, who somehow missed the pit entrance, and had to complete another lap.

Conclusions

Coulthard's words of wisdom are, as ever, short and sweet: "Bad weather, like we had this morning, condenses the practice sessions and running in changeable conditions is not ideal for analysing tyres, but it's the same for everyone so we just get on with it." Webber sheds a bit more light on their day, saying that once they understood how the track was drying out, then they could work on the setup a little more, and they did learn something.

Barrichello is much more hopeful about the car this week. He says: "We have changed the car dramatically since the Monza test as we were simply not competitive then. It's good that the car had a different reaction to the track today and I can feel that the balance has improved." Button adds: "Considering that we were not able to complete many laps today, we have certainly made a step in the right direction since the test." But all at Honda agree there's plenty more work still to be done.

Considering he finished the first session on top, Sutil doesn't rave about it, saying that conditions were difficult with a wet and dry track, and it being very dark. Fisichella thinks it was a fairly good day, but: "I am not 100% happy with the balance as I had a lot of graining on the medium tyres but it wasn't too bad with the hard tyres. We still have to find a compromise with the downforce, but I think we could improve again tomorrow."

BMW had a relatively good day finishing up 2nd and 3rd, with Kubica ahead. He said it was a tough Friday and they couldn't finish their programme due to the bad weather. Heidfeld said the lap times are promising, but he's struggling a little bit with balance – hardly surprising considering the rain.



Williams seem to have their drivers at completely opposite ends of the spectrum. Rosberg finished up in 5th, and says he's started his weekend well, feeling comfortable in the car and getting some decent lap times in. Nakajima finished the day in 16th, although he does still feel like the car isn't too bad.

Hamilton admits that McLaren took it slightly easy today: "Obviously, it was very wet this morning so we only did the bare minimum of running - namely one installation lap." Kovalainen was amazed at how quickly the rain came down: "The weather this morning was unbelievable - it's usually so bright and sunny at Monza." Ron Dennis also possibly explains why they finished up behind Raikkonen saying that in the afternoon, they concentrated on heavy fuel-loads as race preparation.

For Toyota, Glock says that in the dry conditions, the car isn't getting the most out of the tyre, the setup isn't right and he doesn't have confidence in it yet. A real ray of sunshine, then. Trulli is also struggling to keep his motivation up, saying: "So it's not the best type of circuit for us but we will obviously push for the best result we can. For sure this is not the ideal place to have a wet race but obviously we will have to deal with it."

Raikkonen is happy, finishing at the top of the timesheets, and announcing a new deal all in the same day. He said: "I am pleased with how today went. Step by step, the car finally seems to respond well and I think we can be very quick here. The set-up is good and I don't think that any rain that might fall will represent a handicap. I will try and do my best, as always." Massa had a less successful day: "I'm not 100% happy with the way things went today. I struggled a bit to find the right grip level on the first timed lap, unlike the others. So, this means we still have to work to get it right, but I am still confident."

I can forgive Vettel using the staple phrase because he's quite funny as he does so: "Because of the rain, we did not get all of our programme completed in the way we would have wished, but that's the same for everyone. All in all, it was a good day in tricky conditions, as we finished with both cars in one piece!" Bourdais admits that things were difficult and he's hoping that once there's more rubber down on the track things should be easier. However, he does concede that they're looking quite competitive this weekend.

We finish with Renault who, despite ending up 18th and 20th, aren't too worried. Alonso says they built on the work completed during the Monza test, but Piquet bemoans not being able to complete as much running as he'd like. Pat Symonds says the time lost today isn't that bad, as they had the three days of testing, but also reveals they were running high fuel loads which explains the low finishing positions. He'll be hoping that, anyway, so that they can achieve something a bit higher up tomorrow.

That sums up Free Practice, then. I will be back tomorrow with another F1 Digest. Until then, you can join us on Sidepodcast.com for the live commenting during Free Practice 3 and Qualifying, and if you're feeling talkative, leave your thoughts on the voicemail at 0121 28 87225.