



F1 Digest - Singapore Free Practice

Intro

This is the second F1 Digest show for the Singapore Grand Prix weekend, and today we'll be taking a look at both Free Practice sessions and how the drivers feel after hitting the track for the first time.

Free Practice 1

Big thunderstorms overnight ensured that the track was clean, and as it was heading towards 7pm for the first session, temperatures were slowly dropping. Humidity was almost 70%, with track temperature at 30 degrees C and air at 28.

The Force India drivers were first out, and on the live comments, Alianora said: "I'm happy about Force India making history - even if it is a record with little meaning..." Unsurprisingly, though, everyone except for Ferrari went out for an exploratory installation lap. As the track emptied, Race Control announced there was some water on the track, and at Turn 1 there were some little trails of water creeping across the tarmac. However, it wasn't enough to put off Button, who returned to the circuit first, followed by Glock and Bourdais. Button's first time was pretty slow, Glock soon set a benchmark and held it. Raikkonen hit the track relatively early, for a Ferrari, but his first lap was nothing to write home about. In the early part of FP1, Forza Kimi joined us in the live comments and said: "Impressive scenery. It is a great idea the night GP. And the Ferrari colour is great with the lights."

We were busy watching Coulthard run wide at one point of the circuit, and then suddenly we cut to team mate Mark Webber who had stuffed his car into the wall just where the circuit disappears under the grandstands. The car took well over 5 minutes to recover, with Webber watching on anxiously. On Sidepodcast.com, Craig said: "Ooh, Webber in the wall. Is Sunday's biggest challenge going to be negotiating crashed cars?" and Jeremy added: "That corner will claim a few during the weekend. Tiny, tiny mistake and into the wall."

Glock continued to lead, with Rosberg, Massa and both BMWs unable to shake him. Finally, Alonso came and did the deed for them, holding the top spot until Hamilton came and restored some sense of order.

Meanwhile, on the pit straight, Trulli spun coming round the last corner, and ended up facing the wrong way. Instead of doing a 180 and continuing on his way, he chose to travel a few feet down the straight – the wrong way – and turn into the pit lane. In the live comments, Leah said: "Wrong way! Go back!!" Needless to say, the stewards looked into this and Trulli was given a reprimand and a 10,000 Euro fine.

Alonso snatched P1 momentarily, as Massa went third, but next time round, Massa managed to post the fastest time, with team mate Raikkonen slipping into third ahead of the Renault. On the next lap, Raikkonen was the dominant Ferrari, until Hamilton topped the timesheets.

As we watched the cars bumping, and jostling their way around the track, we tuned in to Vettel sliding round the same corner Trulli struggled with, although he got the Toro Rosso under control and continued onwards. Barrichello was the next to have a major issue, this one seeing his Honda backwards into the wall at the same corner. This incident also took the marshals many, many minutes to clear, compromising any fast laps.

At the end of the session, Hamilton was fastest, with Massa fractionally behind him, then Raikkonen, Kovalainen and Kubica.



Free Practice 2

The break between FP1 and 2 was much shorter than normal, due to the first session being pushed back for night running. Therefore, conditions didn't change too much. Both air and track temperature were at about 30 degrees.

We all tuned in ready to watch the session begin, and Race Control announced that it was delayed by 2 minutes. Not for any maintenance work or track issues, but because the marshals were too busy herding guests out of the pit lane. Once the last body had squeezed through the gap in the fence, Rosberg got going, and immediately used up some time on the run off areas. He was joined, on track, not on the run off areas, by Kubica and Vettel with Nakajima close behind. Massa headed out quite early, and slipped into fourth, with Rosberg fastest. When Hamilton joined the madness, he immediately slipped into P1.

About twenty minutes in, Barrichello left the pit lane – some nice work getting his car ready by the mechanics. Just Raikkonen, Bourdais and Webber were left having not visited the track. Webber had an excuse, I'm not sure about the other two.

When Bourdais did hit the track, he was complaining about his car being too high. This is after the mechanics raised the ride height after Bourdais complained it was too low and bottoming out.

Massa took the long way round one corner, in fact heading off into the distance. He tried to do a turn to get back on the track but ended up further away than he started. Eventually, he managed to regain the racing line.

As Fisichella returned to the pitlane, succumbing to a gearbox problem, Webber looked about ready to come out. He hit the track, seconds off the pace, but gradually brought his time down. At the front, though, Massa had recovered from his off to take the fastest time. Kovalainen looked about to beat him but finished his lap just thousandths of a second down.

As the session was drawing to a close, Hamilton stole the lead, Webber got up to ninth, and Glock clouted the wall, knocking off his front wing. However, Alonso went quickest at the very last second, thus grabbing the headline. The fastest five at the end of the session were Alonso, Hamilton, Massa, Kovalainen and Rosberg.

After the session, Dom caught up with some of the action, and said: "Having now seen small snippets from the practice sessions, I fully understand the fuss. We have struck gold. An absolutely brilliant circuit with astonishing scenery. This is going to be a weekend to remember."

Conclusions

I can tell you my conclusion instantly: looks like a gorgeous track, and seeing so many incidents already means it's got my seal of approval. However, let's see what the drivers think. We'll start at the bottom of the timesheets, Sutil says that the circuit is beautiful but quite physical because humidity is really high, and the bumps aren't very comfortable. Fisichella finished up 17th and says he feels quite positive about the circuit: "It is very challenging and difficult to learn and especially to feel confident. It's a very physical circuit, very twisty, and it's hot and humid so I think it will be tough on Sunday. It's interesting to run at night. It doesn't make that much difference for us to be honest on the track, but it's a different routine and having a free morning and then practice at 7pm was really good."

For Ferrari, Massa agrees that visibility is not a problem, but the pit lane is a problem, as the entrance and the exit aren't easy to negotiate. He's got confidence in the car: "This is only the start of the weekend and there is still a lot of work to do, but we have got off on the right foot. The car is handling well, especially on the harder tyres, but we know track conditions will improve so it is too early to draw conclusions." Raikkonen also commends the lighting and says it doesn't really feel like nighttime at all, however he does say he doesn't think there'll be much overtaking.

Webber says that despite a lack of running time, he feels the team made a reasonable recovery and he owes them one. "My first session was much too short, as I got into the little chicane a bit too hot and hit the wall. I should have gone down the escape road, but hindsight is a great thing! I damaged the front right corner and also the steering rack, which gave the guys a lot of work to do in a short space of time." They managed to complete the work and get him out again, but Webber doesn't feel their preparation isn't over yet. Coulthard says the circuit is very unforgiving and is anticipating a lot of incidents, especially considering how many we have already seen.

Button was surprised by the conditions during practice today: "It's been a very strange day of testing tonight! You would expect the conditions to be cooler but this has to be one of the hottest Fridays that we've ever had and it's just so humid. The circuit is interesting to drive and it's very bumpy which adds to the excitement as the bumps bounce the car all over the place." Barrichello says there is only one bit of visibility he is worried about – at Turn 5 – but the rest is good. He also says that the car was bottoming out way too much, and the bumps meant he was just a passenger for much of the second session.

Rosberg is in the same camp as the guys that think the bumps are a problem, saying they could even be so bad as to give a driver a serious headache. However, he does feel quite confident that Williams will be having a good weekend. Nakajima thinks that things are going okay, considering all the obstacles against them: "The grip level is not at all bad, maybe a little low at the moment, but by the time we get into qualifying and the race, the track will have rubbered in well. In the second session I had a bit of a moment as I made contact with the wall, but fortunately the damage was minor and I could complete the planned programme."

Glock proclaims the track as being a bit unusual, but is happy that his small foray into the barrier didn't cost the team any running as it was right at the end of the second practice. Trulli adds to the progress of the team: "We have been improving gradually throughout the two sessions. We are trying to find the right set-up and we have changed quite a lot on the car." He also adds his thoughts to the visibility issues saying that there are some dark spots he wasn't expecting but mostly it's all good.

Vettel discusses the issues that everyone else has, the bumps and the visibility, but adds some problems with his car: "As for my car, I'm not happy yet as it feels very loose and I don't think we will have an easy time. So tonight we must work hard to improve it and hopefully make a step forward tomorrow." Bourdais is okay with the lighting: "There are no worries about running under the lights and I even ran with a lightly smoked visor. There are hardly any shadows and you can see very well." He says that having to run the car so high to avoid the bumps is causing problems but they are working on finding the right setup.

Hamilton is impressed with the circuit, but says it's hard work: "It's a very physical circuit - more than I expected, actually. You need to put a lot of work into the car to get a good lap - I'd say it requires double the energy of Monaco over a single lap. One lap around here is like two laps of Monaco!" Kovalainen adds to this with some thoughts on the feeling of the circuit: "This place has got some difficult corners but I quite like all the sectors. It was quite a busy session today and the traffic made it a bit difficult to pull a clear lap together but it feels good when you get it right."

For BMW, Kubica feels like he had a productive day: "It is very important to have a stable car here as you can easily lose a lot of time in several corners. On the first lap I got used to the track and, as I was going at a good pace immediately, we were then able to start working on the set-up. In the second session we did the tyre comparison." Heidfeld, meanwhile, feels like things are a little bit different to how he expected them to be. "It is much more of a street circuit than the new track in Valencia and is more challenging. Here it's significantly narrower. When I walked the track on Wednesday night the straights appeared relatively long, but that's not the case when you fly along at F1 speed."



Alonso is keen to show that he's still doing a job: "The first day of work has gone well. The circuit is interesting, very bumpy in places, especially into turn number 7, and we have to keep an eye on that because it can become a problem." Piquet is happy to let us know he's having a good time: "It was an interesting experience to drive today during the night and the organisers have done a remarkable job to make this possible." Let's hope the Singapore organisers make a good job of the whole weekend.

That's it for today. It was good to get our first glimpse of Singapore, but the real story will start tomorrow in qualifying. Join me on Sidepodcast.com for live commenting if you can, or if not, come back for another F1 Digest to catch up with all the action.

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