



F1 Digest - Japan Preview

Intro

Welcome to F1 Digest for the Japanese Grand Prix. This is Sidepodcast's dedicated race coverage, and over the next four days we will cover all Free Practice sessions, Qualifying, and the race. Today, though, we are previewing the event.

Vital Statistics

Date: 14th October

Circuit: Fuji Speedway

Length: 4.6km

Laps: 67

2007 Winner: Lewis Hamilton

Last Year

Before we get on to this year, let's remind ourselves what happened at Fuji in 2007.

[Begin Montage]

Chris: Free Practice 3, Saturday morning, the weather was pretty bad, plenty of fog. The medical helicopter couldn't take off and that's a bit of a problem because the nearest hospital is miles and miles away. At first the session was delayed by 15 minutes, then another 15 minutes. The cars did get to go out but only for 4 minutes before the session was red flagged.

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Chris: On Sunday, it was still very, very wet. The chances were pretty high of having to start the race behind the safety car. The most important corner of the championship, Hamilton vs. Alonso, and they go and ruin it by starting behind a safety car.

Me: Yea, rubbish.

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Chris: It turns out that Charlie Whiting told all the teams to start on extreme wets, and both Ferrari's didn't, so it wasn't long before Kimi had to come in and change his tyres as well. This put both Ferrari's to the back of the pack, and Ferrari claim that they weren't told about the tyre thing, even though every other team knew about it and all the ITV people knew about it and everything.

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Chris: Hamilton started backing everyone up again, generally causing havoc. Vettel collided with Webber which put them both out of the race. Webber was a little bit annoyed, shall we say?

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Chris: So all that stood between Raikkonen and a podium place was Massa. Of course, Massa then had to pit for new tyres and fuel.

Me: Don't be so cynical to say that was deliberate.

Chris: Well, he'd already pitted three times, and there was only a few laps to go.

Me: Oh.

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Chris: The final points positions went to Hamilton, Kovalainen, Raikkonen, Coulthard, Fisichella, Massa, Kubica and Liuzzi. I was going to say it was a notable drive from Sutil who came in 9th after Liuzzi, but Liuzzi was given a 25 second penalty for overtaking Sutil under yellow flags, which bumped Sutil up to get his first ever championship point.

[End Montage]

Insider's View

Now we're back in the present, and have a couple of thoughts from our paddock regulars Nico Rosberg and Alex Wurz. First up Nico fills us in on some of the updates to the circuit:

Nico: Fuji is a nice track. Again, it's been redone by Hermann Tilke, the architect who did a very good job there. I think the track layout stayed the same but he readjusted the kerbs and the asphalt and the safety, so it's a nice track now.

Wurz talks about two subjects, firstly he evaluates the track:

Alex: They've done an extensive upgrade on the circuit. They still maintain the ultra-long straight, you know, where you stay on full gas for more than 15 seconds, with the hairpin at the end. That's going to be a big challenge for the braking point at the start. Then the rest of the circuit has quite a natural flow with some quick corners, the last sector is quite slow, it's going a lot up and down hill.

And secondly, how passionate the crowd support can be at Fuji:

Alex: In Japan, of course you have the fans, who queue up already in the middle of the night to get grandstands. They're crazy about the drivers, very enthusiastic, always come and take pictures, autographs, they send you home things. When I got my first kids, you know, they were sending things home for my children, so they are very true fans.

Team Thoughts

We'll start our look at the team's thoughts ahead of this year's race with McLaren. Hamilton feels like he has learned a valuable lesson from Singapore, that he can control his instincts to drive for the win, and concentrate on championship strategy. He does add, though: "I hate driving for points, but I think we can all see the benefit of that



approach at the moment.” Regarding Fuji, he doesn’t mind whether it’s wet or dry, although it’s easier to race in dry conditions, but he’s hoping the rain will hold off so the fans will have a good time. Bless. Kovalainen gives us an insight into what you need to be good in Japan: “There is no single corner at Fuji that particularly contributes to your laptime. It’s relatively easy to understand the corners, and it’s not a particularly tricky circuit. So it’s a place where you can’t afford to make any mistakes, you have to be absolutely precise and extract the maximum from your car to be fast.”

Over at BMW, Heidfeld is hoping for a dry race, or at least less rain than last year. Of the track, he says: “It’s a fun circuit. There are lots of uphill and downhill gradients and several blind corners. But I’m a bit hard on it as Suzuka was always my favourite GP track. One feature of the Fuji circuit that stands out is its extremely long straight.” Kubica enjoys the passion of the Japanese fans: “As always in Japan, I think the fans will bring a unique atmosphere to the Formula One track. Usually they come to the track early in the morning and leave it after us.”

Honda face their home crowd this weekend, and Button is looking forward to some good support from the fans. He agrees with Heidfeld that Suzuka is preferable, and is already looking forward to returning there in 2009. Barrichello picks up on some of the problems they will face this weekend: “I was very impressed with the Fuji Speedway. The track is a lot more interesting than we originally thought with a nice flow and some tight challenging corners towards the end of the lap. We had limited dry running last year, and then of course the very wet race, so we don’t have a comparison of how the track would be over a normal race weekend.”

Sutil may have a bit of an edge over the other drivers. He says: “I have raced in Fuji a lot, perhaps more than any other driver in F1 as I spent a year doing Japanese Formula 3 in 2006. I had so many races there that year that it feels like my home track! It’s not an easy circuit, there are some particular corners where you have to be smooth and not push too hard and of course there is that long, long straight.” And last year he got his first point, so he’s half-hoping to repeat that this time round. Fisichella is also looking to do well but says he won’t make any predictions: “After the last race in Singapore, I think you can’t predict any outcome! In my career I don’t think I’ve seen a season that’s been so full of twists and unpredictable conditions and results. For us, we have to do what we have been doing - concentrating on our performance, making no mistakes and getting to the end of the race.”

Alonso is still beaming from his win last race: “After our victory in Singapore, the whole team is determined to have those feelings again as soon as possible. We must remain focused and try to repeat our level of performance from Singapore to fight at the front. However, I remain realistic as it will be difficult to race the Ferraris and McLarens, but we will give our maximum to score as many points as possible because the fight for fourth in the championship remains very close.” Piquet is prepared to work hard in Fuji: “It’s another circuit that I don’t know and that I will have to learn. I will try to get up to speed as quickly as possible on Friday and make the most of the three hours of practice available to me. The team has some data from last year and so I have been preparing with that and will learn more with my engineers during our circuit walk on Thursday.”

For Toyota, it is also their home race, and Trulli is looking to put Singapore behind him and move on, although he doesn’t think there’s much more they can do: “It is impossible for me and the team to push any harder than we have already been doing this season, because we have given everything, but I know our fans will give us great support as always and I will be fighting really hard to get a strong result.” Glock, meanwhile, is feeling super confident: “Having not driven the track before it’s hard to make predictions but we have been strong at most races this season and we are very motivated to be competitive again. Singapore was a bit too bumpy for our car so we could not show our true potential but I don’t expect the same problem at Fuji Speedway, although from what I have heard the weather can be an issue there. I actually enjoy driving in the rain and I believe it is one of my strong points, so I don’t mind what the weather does!”



Rosberg admits that Fuji is probably not well suited for the Williams car, but if it does rain, they're in with a chance of a strong finish. Nakajima is excited about his home race, and Fuji almost is home as his F3 team were based at the circuit. He does say that the expectations as the grid's only Japanese driver are making him a little nervous.

Ferrari have decided to go back to their old pit system with a lollipop man instead of complex traffic lights. Domenicali says that the team need to keep things simple and concentrate on racing, rather than worrying about pit stops. Raikkonen has admitted to being sad about the recent race results, with so many DNFs and uncompetitive finishes. However, he remains hopeful that things in Japan will go smoothly. Massa is also looking to keep his championship chances alive at the Fuji Speedway.

With no preview quotes, I have gathered just two notable stories about Toro Rosso and Red Bull respectively. Firstly, Mateschitz isn't 100% sure about selling Toro Rosso now, after such good performance recently. The only problem he has now is where the customer car regulations will go, but at least he's still thinking about it. Meanwhile at Red Bull, they believe an electrical surge from a nearby tram affected Webber's gearbox and that's why he retired in Singapore. Basically, we know now that the team couldn't get any more unlucky. Let's hope some good things occur for them in Japan.

That's it for this preview edition of F1 Digest. If you're in Europe, the Free Practice sessions are on in the crazy hours of the morning, but we will still be live commenting on Sidepodcast.com. Please join us, if you can, but if not, I'll be back with a full run down of all the action.

