



F1 Digest - Japan Free Practice

Intro

Welcome to the second episode of F1 Digest for the Japanese Grand Prix weekend. Free Practice 1 and 2 have now been completed, so stay tuned for a full rundown of all the action.

Free Practice 1

Friday morning at the Fuji Speedway was bright, the sun was out, and the track temperature was at 29 degrees C, the air at about 22.

Fisichella was the first man to hit the track, but he was followed by almost everyone else. Within four minutes it was just the Ferraris that had to leave the pit lane, but it took us until 15 minutes into the session before we saw a complete lap time. Glock was the first to set a benchmark, and he and Trulli spent some time entertaining the Japanese fans.

They were joined, eventually, by Bourdais and Piquet, but Glock retained his lead. When Raikkonen hit the track, he only managed fourth, as Piquet took the top spot. Kimi hit the top next time round, though.

They were joined by the rest of the pack, until eventually it was just Massa who didn't have a time. Kovalainen slipped into 12th on his first lap, whilst Hamilton managed to grab second at the first time of asking, and he took P1 next time round. Raikkonen responded very quickly and retook the lead.

Finally, Massa left the pit lane but couldn't get higher than 18th on his first flying lap. However he improved to fourth position on his second go, then second, then made it a Ferrari 1-2.

Hamilton re-took the top spot, but things were getting close at the top. Massa managed to close to just a thousandth of the McLaren's time. Plenty of drivers kept circulating, but things calmed down until the last few minutes of the session. Pretty much everyone hit the track, but we had very little improvements.

The fastest five were Hamilton, Massa, Kovalainen, Raikkonen and Alonso.

Free Practice 2

By the time Free Practice 2 got going, the recorded temperatures were about the same as the first session, but the fans in the grandstands looked a lot colder. Clouds were beginning to gather.

Heidfeld was the first man out but there was a bundle out of the pit lane, and lap times were set almost immediately. Heidfeld posted the first benchmark but it lasted only momentarily, as the leaderboard was changing almost every second.

Hamilton was the first of the front runners to top the timesheets, and Kovalainen made it a McLaren 1-2. Raikkonen was slow on his first lap, and Massa slipped into sixth. On the Ferrari's second attempt, Raikkonen took sixth, whilst Massa improved to fourth, momentarily, and then he took the lead.

Suddenly, almost out of nowhere, Sutil snatched P1 from the Ferrari, then Trulli jumped him, and then Vettel. The track was obviously clearing up, and Glock was the next to benefit. We saw the drivers putting on the softer tyres,



although it was hard to tell with Bridgestone's beautiful green stripes. Although the times were improving slightly, it looked as though the teams were determined to get as many laps as possible in, rather than go for glory.

In the last few minutes, Alonso managed to jump up to second, and Webber slipped into fifth, only to be pushed down the order again. The final fastest five of the session were: Glock, Alonso, Hamilton, Massa and Raikkonen.

Conclusions

We'll start with Force India, and Sutil finished the day in 16th. He said it was a good day, the car was working well, and his only real problem was some traffic in the afternoon. Fisichella wound up 18th, and had a much more difficult day, saying he struggled with oversteer and the tyres as well.

Honda were also struggling, although Barrichello is feeling positive: "Just like last year, we have had a dry first day of practice and by the end of the afternoon we were able to achieve a reasonable balance with the car on new tyres. The weather forecast for the weekend looks interesting so we need to take a close look at that. However if it stays dry, then I believe we have a chance to progress to the second qualifying session." Button is slightly concerned about new tyres, as he's struggling with grip, but the older tyres are much better.

McLaren ended up with Hamilton 3rd and Kovalainen 9th. Lewis says he's feeling pretty confident, and says the track requires a good set-up, which he thinks they're on the path to getting. Kovalainen shares more about this: "We made some good progress with the set-up into the afternoon and that also made me feel a lot more confident about attacking this place. I don't think today's times are totally representative, but we're certainly in good shape for the rest of the weekend."

Glock's happy with his performance for Toyota: "That was a good day. This was the first time I have driven at the Fuji Speedway so I had to learn the track this morning. It didn't take too long - two or three laps, but it's not an easy circuit. It's especially difficult to find the right compromise for the long high speed straight and the last sector which is very technical." Trulli says he had a different programme from Glock, and adds: "This is Toyota's home race so it is an important event for us. There is no extra pressure but we just really want to do well in front of our home fans." For Williams, Nakajima ended the day 7th and said he struggled with grip during the first session but pins that on the fuel load they were carrying. That doesn't necessarily bode well for the race. Rosberg believes that this race is going to be much harder than Singapore, whilst Sam Michael confirms that they completed the programme for the day and had no reliability problems.

Alonso continued his strong form from Singapore by finishing up 2nd, but says the time wasn't everything: "We covered lots of laps, which was the priority and that allowed us to advance with our programme." Meanwhile, Piquet learnt the track easily: "The circuit is interesting, not particularly difficult, and I was able to get comfortable with it quite quickly. We have made good progress with our technical programme today and although we still have a lot to do from now until tomorrow, it's definitely a good start and a sound basis to work from for the rest of the weekend."

Vettel is feeling quite confident for Toro Rosso, although he did have a problem during FP2: "Unfortunately, this afternoon, we had a hydraulic problem which meant I didn't manage to do the long runs I wanted. But the car seems well balanced, which I was able to check at the very end of the session after the boys had worked very hard to get me out on track before the flag. I think we should be fine for qualifying, but for race set up I would have preferred more time to do some long runs. Tyre wise I think we are sorted though." Bourdais is another driver to have been learning the track: "It's my first time at this track and also my first visit to Japan. The track is not the most exciting but it's nicely done with a good bump-free surface and it's a great facility. It's not a difficult track to learn as there only eight real corners. But after that, it can become quite tricky, because at the final complex, if you are too aggressive on the entry you pay the price on the exit, losing time for the straight, so you have to be careful not to be your own worst enemy."



For Ferrari, Massa finished 4th and Raikkonen 5th. Felipe says of his day: "The times are very close and maybe I could have been a bit further up the order in the afternoon session if I had not encountered traffic on my last run on the soft tyres. These seem to be very quick, which is no surprise, but also very consistent." Raikkonen knows where his priorities lie: "It seems very finely balanced with the lap times all very close. This means it will be very important to have a good qualifying otherwise you run the risk of being a long way back on the grid. I think our car is going well on this track and even if there is still some work to do to improve the handling, I am reasonably satisfied."

BMW seem to have been quite subdued but then they don't usually go for glory during Free Practice. Kubica said they had a normal day with setup work and tyre evaluation going smoothly. Meanwhile, Heidfeld finished in 19th and says it wasn't such a good day for him: "I'm not happy with the balance of the car yet, it is sliding too much. Because of this in the first session I spun once, which seldom happens to me. Also, which is exceptional for us, in the second session I had minor technical problems. First the brake balance adjuster in the cockpit came loose, and shortly before the end of the session we had a hydraulic alarm and I came into the pit. There were only three minutes left, so it wasn't worth going out again. However, I didn't really lose track time and it's only Friday. I'm totally confident we shall improve for tomorrow."

Finally we look at Red Bull, and Coulthard highlights the last sector as particularly low on grip. He's also slightly unhappy with the track as a whole: "It doesn't matter if you're a racing driver or a punter, a nice corner is a nice corner, and they tend to be ones where you see into them, or it's banked and you ride the corner. In contrast, you don't normally see them here before you're on them, or it's off camber so the car slides at the rear." Webber, however, is thankful for the same thing I think we all are: "We enjoyed some dry weather today, which is an improvement on last year!"

That's it for today's F1 Digest. We've looked at both Free Practice sessions in plenty of detail, and tomorrow we'll do the same thing for Qualifying. If you're around during the Saturday action, join us on Sidepodcast.com for Live Commenting, or else I will see you for tomorrow's F1 Digest.