



F1 Digest 2009 – Australia Free Practice

Hello and welcome to F1 Digest 2009 – Australia Free Practice.

Today we had two fun-filled sessions that gave us a good indication of who's doing well, yet at the same time, really didn't. Without further ado, let's get right on with the good stuff.

Free Practice 1

The threat of rain that seemed to be circulating earlier in the week had dissipated by today, but it was much cooler than anticipated and the sun struggled to make it through the clouds. The air temperature settled on about 18 degrees C, whilst the track was slightly warmer at 25 degrees.

All eyes on the end of the pitlane to see who would be the first out on track, and it was unsurprisingly the Force India boys. Ah, it's like 2008 all over again. Once the installation laps were out the way, it was just Barrichello and Alonso who hadn't tasted the tarmac yet, and it turns out that Alonso was feeling the after effects from a problem his car had yesterday.

Buemi was the first to head out for some serious runs, which makes sense, as the rookie could do with getting as many miles under his belt as possible. Alonso finally completed his installation lap, before the big guns came out – Raikkonen, Massa and Hamilton. Well, you would expect Lewis to be a big gun, but in fact, his times weren't remarkable. Rosberg, meanwhile, **was** posting impressive times.

Although we didn't see anyone lose their front wing as expected, there were plenty of drivers having small moments, exploring plenty of run off area and kicking up a lot of grass. Massa, in particular, couldn't get his Ferrari to turn in at one corner and disappeared down the escape road. Vettel didn't have time to experience any off track moments, as he had to pull to a stop in the Red Bull, parking nicely at the side of the track.

Things got suddenly very busy, with the times dropping, and Alonso finally decided to join in the fun – almost an hour in. Raikkonen was the first to bolt on the super soft tyres, and posted a super quick time, zipping to the top of the timesheets. On the next lap, though, his time dropped off rapidly, and it made it look like the gap between the tyres was going to be a significant factor this weekend.

Nakajima was the next driver to experience some rough terrain after veering off track. It looked like he was moving out the way for another car but turns out he had a puncture and had to return to the pitlane.

A few more laps completed, the times gradually dropping, and then FP1 was over. Notably, after the chequered flag had dropped, Kubica found himself stacked up behind a slow moving Buemi, and waved his fist as he finally managed to slide past the Toro Rosso.

Results

Nico Rosberg was the fastest driver in Free Practice 1, posting a 1:26.687, with teammate Nakajima picking up the second fastest time in the dying moments of the session. Raikkonen was third, with Barrichello behind him, and Kovalainen rounding out the top five. Button slipped into sixth place, which proves that Brawn GP does have the pace we anticipated... so far.



Massa was the seventh fastest driver, Glock in eighth, followed by Sutil and Alonso. A good job by the Renault, considering he only managed to complete 16 laps in the 90 minutes. The top ten were separated by just over 1.4 seconds.

Heidfeld was running KERS and finished 11th, whilst his teammate sat in 13th, the pair separated by Jarno Trulli. Kubica's time of 1:28.511 was set without KERS. BMW have decided to run a split strategy this week, mostly because Kubica is at a weight disadvantage when the KERS device is included. The team have suggested the weight limit be raised so as not to penalise drivers based on how heavy they are.

Fisichella was down in 14th, disappointing relative to 9th placed Sutil, but very acceptable for the Force India pair. Buemi posted the 15th fastest time, completing the most laps of the session with 27. Hamilton struggled down in 16th, with a 1:29.042, and just 4 hundredths behind him was Mark Webber, who only completed 7 laps.

Piquet finished the session in 18th, whilst former teammates Bourdais and Vettel completed the timesheets. Vettel only managed just four laps and ended the day three seconds off the pace – but the team diagnosed the issue as a hydraulic problem, and got it fixed in time for FP2.

Free Practice 2

This session was slightly later than in previous years, to hopefully reflect the later-starting race conditions better. The air temperature remained the same, whilst the track heated up to 31 degrees. The sun had finally come out, and was happily warming up the tarmac.

Trulli headed out first, followed by teammate Glock, and the others were out ready to set times almost straight away. We instantly saw that track and/or tyre conditions hadn't improved from the morning, as a couple of cars, including Alonso, found themselves spinning off again.

In Free Practice 1, Bourdais was heard on the radio to his engineers whilst sitting in the garage, complaining about the lack of grip. During this second session, Kubica's engineers were the ones getting the grief, as the Pole said he doesn't even feel like he was driving the car. Sutil was also heard on the radio suggesting there was a problem with the car, but told that he would have to get used to it, as it was just the way the tyres worked.

Meanwhile, Vettel's highlight of the day came as he posted the third fastest time, but later on in the session, having struggled with Turn 4 a couple of times, he lost the rear of the car and spun off into the gravel. Thoroughly beached, he was out of the car and once again heading back to the pitlane.

Massa was also struggling for grip, and after wobbling on the track, he managed to hold a slide, almost gracefully. That was in the second sector, but it looks as though the third was the one catching out most drivers. As they put in their last charges for a time, the final few corners halted any improvements. The chequered flag was waved.

Results

Rosberg leads for the second session in a row, with a 1:26.053, and he was closely followed by Barrichello, who was just a tenth behind him. Next Trulli in third, who, along with teammate Glock in 6th, posted the most laps with 42. Mark Webber was in fourth, notably the only driver in the top seven to be in a car that hasn't had it's rear diffuser protested against.

Button finished the day in 5th, with Glock behind, then Nakajima, and Vettel in 8th. Impressive from Vettel who had little running in the morning, and only completed 19 laps of the second session. Adrian Sutil once again managed to get himself inside the top ten, posting the ninth fastest time, with Felipe Massa just two hundredths of a second behind him.



11th place Raikkonen finished on a 1:27.204 after 32 laps, whilst the gap between him and next place Alonso, Fisichella and Heidfeld spanned only one tenth. Next up, the complaining couple, with Kubica in 15th and Bourdais just behind him in 16th. Hamilton finished in 18th, which he will surely not be impressed about, even more so that Kovi was been ahead of him all day, finishing 17th in this session.

Finally, rounding out the timesheets, Piquet on a 1:27.8 and Buemi on a 1:28.0.

From the Comments

We were all eagerly awaiting the Free Practice sessions to show us whether our perception of who was fast or slow was right. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to have happened. Dom said: "All things considered, I don't think Friday Practice has told us much we didn't already know, or helped us work out which team has the fastest car, and that's probably a good thing because it makes qualifying even more unpredictable."

RG added: "I don't think practice is showing the true pace of any of the cars. I don't think the BMW's are that slow or Lewis Hamilton is anywhere near as bad as he is showing."

Mr C liked the fact that the action wasn't all about crashes and spins: "We did experience a different kind of drama though, as our expectations played out in front of our eyes and a new F1 world order appeared to be established. Last year's winners look slow while the car that could barely make it up the hill in Brazil unaided looks like a genuine race contender."

Lady Snowcat posted her thoughts after watching the action: "I was sorry to see that Rubens looks better than Jenson in the Brawn, I was sorry to see that the KERS effect seems to be that it makes the cars too heavy to be competitive and I was obviously sorry that Kimi wasn't on top of the timesheets for both sessions."

Meanwhile, Gavin didn't see the practice sessions but said: "I almost spat out my coffee when I got to work and saw who were fastest. I know you can't always see true pace from Free Practice but I saw enough to completely change my Fantasy Racers team!" And Vinnchan echoed that thought, saying: "Just look at the trading going on in the fantasy league, that's enough to show you that Free Practice was enough to surprise everyone."

Team by Team

Let's start with Renault, who are very tight-lipped about their day, with Alonso simply saying: "Today we concentrated on car set-up in hot conditions without being too concerned by what our competitors were doing. We are missing some grip but we have some ideas about how we can overcome these issues." Piquet admits the day wasn't easy with: "I struggled to find a good balance on a green track with little grip." They both are quick to say they're still feeling positive though.

Trulli also feels they've got a lot of work to do, despite finishing third overall. He says: "In general we have worked really hard to understand the tyres and find the right setup, which isn't easy. I'm still not completely happy with the car balance, and even though when you look at the timing sheets things look pretty good for us, the car isn't completely comfortable to drive." Glock says that he preferred the first session over the second, as the good feeling he had in the car in the morning was marred by some problems in the afternoon.

I kinda thought McLaren would be frustrated with their poor performance today, but they all seem quite pragmatic about the problems they face. Hamilton says: "The changes we made after Practice 1 made the car feel much better. We're still working to refine the balance – and we have a number of issues still to address – but we are heading in the right direction." Heikki agrees that it was a reasonable day for them, even if the times look a little low. He adds: "Our balance was good, particularly in the high-speed corners, and KERS deployed well, working smoothly



throughout both sessions.” Ah, our first mention of KERS. For what it’s worth, it’s impossible to tell who was using it, when and where, during the sessions. Hopefully we’ll get more of an idea later in the weekend.

Force India were surprisingly high up the timesheets today, and Sutil isn’t going to get carried away: “I hope this is representative of where we are, but it is still very early on in the weekend.” Fisichella is also cautious but erring on the side of optimism: “We’re in better shape than last year for sure though. We will see tomorrow but at least we know there is potential to improve overnight.”

Our leader for the day Rosberg seems to be moderately surprised by his own performance: “The FW31 is well balanced all round the track, but seems even more so in sector two than in any other places. After a winter of testing, it’s good to get out on a new, fresh track and we seem to be in a better position than we thought.” You could say that, Nico. Nakajima agrees that sector two is the best for them, and also his favourite, saying: “It includes a complete variety of corners, from the medium speed in turn 6 to the slow speed corners like 9, while 11 and 12 are the quickest. It makes it hard to establish a rhythm, but sector two certainly keeps your attention!”

Whilst it wasn’t a complete shocker to see McLaren at the bottom of the timesheets, I was expecting more from Ferrari who finished 10th and 11th. Massa says: “We are more or less okay with the setup, although there is still room to improve the performance. I was not able to do a time on the soft tyres in the second session as I made a mistake because of oversteer.” Kimi, though, says his setup isn’t completely satisfactory despite trying a whole host of different options. He’s looking to tomorrow to see how the real comparisons pan out, though.

Vettel is the only driver to have suffered major disasters today, and he says: “We had a bad session in this morning’s practice. In the afternoon we were able to get some laps in, but unfortunately I made a stupid mistake towards the end of the practice, so we couldn’t run through our programme.” He is relatively happy with the times the team have been setting though, and with Webber in 4th, it’s looking okay for them. Mark is just happy to be home: “It’s great to be back in Australia. I’m proud of the Australian GP; they put on an excellent show here for everyone and it’s good for the local people. They’ve had a tough few months recently with the fires, so I hope they enjoy the weekend.”

BMW were also running KERS on Heidfeld’s car but he makes no mention of it, simply saying they completed the entire programme and had no technical problems. I guess no news is good news. Kubica is hoping the data they gathered today will help with his grip problem. Meanwhile, Willy Rampf says: “The focus was the setup work for the race, but so far we are not satisfied with this. The decisive factor will be to use the tyre performance perfectly for both specifications. We will concentrate on this in the third practice.”

Brawn GP had their first taste of real F1 running and proved they were up to the task. Barrichello finished the day second and is glad that they are competitive despite a significant lack of testing. Button finished up in fifth and says: “We still have some work to do on the softer tyre so that will be a priority for tomorrow’s practice session. I had traffic on both of my new tyres runs which was a shame. So, we don’t know how quick we are over one lap yet, but there is plenty of time to find that out tomorrow.”

Finally, Toro Rosso were down towards the bottom of the timesheets, and Bourdais is simply glad that their day was trouble free and they got some good running in. He admits though: “We knew we were not going to be quick enough, as we are lacking some development parts, which at this early point in the season always make a big difference.” New boy Buemi had a good initial experience: “My first F1 practice session and I had a lot of new things to learn and to deal with. It was not too bad, we tried various changes and improved the car lap by lap.”

Quote of the Day



That's all for this episode of F1 Digest, I don't know about you, but today has simply made qualifying even more exciting. Join us on Sidepodcast.com for live commenting during the sessions if you can, and I will be back tomorrow with a full roundup of the action. For now, I will simply leave you with this quote from Jarno Trulli:

"I have to say it's great to be back at a Grand Prix because I love being behind the wheel with the atmosphere and excitement of a race weekend; this is what I live for."

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YOUR WEEKLY F1 FIX