



F1 Digest 2009 – Australia Qualifying

Welcome to F1 Digest 2009 – Australia Qualifying.

We saw some very interesting results in Free Practice yesterday, and qualifying could only hold more great things. Listen on to find out whether it did or not.

Free Practice 3

It was a little bit brighter today than it was yesterday, and the air temperature started at 19 degrees C, whilst the track was up to 35. Toyota was out early, with Trulli hitting the track, whilst Massa and Bourdais almost collided coming out of the pitlane. There was no hanging around for the drivers this morning, with all bar Raikkonen, Button and Barrichello out in the first few minutes.

However, it did take a good quarter of an hour or so before we saw the first laptime, with Piquet getting the first time on the board. When Raikkonen did make it out the garage, he only completed a few laps before the Ferrari slowed right down, and coasted off track – Kimi was heard on the radio telling the team he had lost all hydraulics.

Vettel was posting some seriously fast times, lowering the benchmark each lap, until he ran wide over the grass. Moments later, he was returning to the pitlane with a problem, telling the team that something was broken on the car. The third session in a row that he hasn't managed to complete!

Meanwhile, Kubica continued moaning to his engineers, this time not only mentioning the lack of grip, but that other cars were bringing dust and grit back on to the track, which wasn't helping.

There was a moment of calm before the last ten minutes saw all the drivers hit the track, if they were able, and the laptimes once again began to fall.

Results

Rosberg made it three in a row, by topping Saturday Practice with a 1:25.808, closely followed by Jarno Trulli with a 1:25.811. Button continued to show the Brawn pace in third, with Massa the fastest of the non-uber diffuser bunch in fourth. Nakajima struggled to match his teammates pace this time round in fifth, although in reality, he was just two tenths off the lead time.

Barrichello posted the sixth fastest time with Webber seventh, and the hardest working man on the grid Glock in eighth, with 25 laps completed. Kubica and Heidfeld stuck together in 9th and 10th despite Nick running KERS whilst Robert does not have the device installed.

Kovalainen managed to top Hamilton again, although only by six hundredths of a second, with the pair 11th and 12th respectively. Vettel managed to finish in 13th, despite the problems he has suffered for three sessions in a row.

Sutil kept Force India's improvements alive with a 1:27.062, having completed just 12 laps, and he was followed by Buemi and Bourdais, who were just four hundredths apart. Alonso was disappointingly down in 17th, but four tenths ahead of Piquet in 19th, with Fisichella between them. Raikkonen finished last, having completed only five laps, which meant he was over a second slower than Piquet.

Qualifying



Ahead of qualifying, the air temperature rose to 24 degrees C, but the track temperature had fallen slightly to just 32. The sun still shone though, and the wind had died down slightly.

The first session got underway with an amazing amount of action. We're so used to seeing the teams leaving it to the last minute, but with so many unknowns, the drivers were out there getting their names on the board. Fisichella set the first time, but he was soon knocked down by many, many others. Raikkonen was out uncharacteristically early, and it was just the BMW boys left waiting for the opportune moment.

Rosberg set an early benchmark, and managed to keep it until Nakajima took it from him. However, the Williams domination was over as soon as the Brawn cars hit the track. They made it a 1-2 with Barrichello on top, until Webber came from way down in 13th to top the boards. The last few minutes were manic, and finally, the first session was over.

Once the chequered flag dropped, the fastest three were Barrichello, Button and Webber, whilst we lost Buemi, Piquet, Fisichella, Sutil and Bourdais.

For the second session of qualifying, the breaking news was that Hamilton was out of the car and not able to continue. At the time, all we knew was that the car had developed a problem with the driveshaft. Meanwhile, Kimi kept up his early starts and headed out first, quickly joined by his teammate, plus both Toyota and Brawn GP drivers. Glock jumped up to first, then Button, then Vettel. Webber, meanwhile, slipped into second.

The BMWs left it as late as possible again, and on their first go, Heidfeld was 11th, whilst Kubica was 3rd – the first time they have been vastly far apart. Kovalainen, the sole representative of McLaren was down in 14th, and although his hot lap looked good, it failed to improve his position. A final last ditch effort for times and the session was over.

Barrichello, Button and Vettel were the fastest three, whilst dropping out were Heidfeld, Alonso, Nakajima, Kovalainen, and obviously Hamilton.

The final ten minutes got underway with current leaders Button and Barrichello out early, quickly joined by the rest of the contenders. Button got the early benchmark, his teammate behind with Rosberg third and Kimi in fourth. The Ferrari gradually dropped down the order, though, as the Red Bulls made their mark. All came in for a final stop before the last hot lap, and just two minutes later, the grid was set.

Results

Button secured his fourth ever pole position with a 1:26.202, narrowly beating teammate Barrichello who had posted a 1:26.5. Vettel lines up on the second row, proving that he's got what it takes even if problems have littered his weekend so far. Kubica was in 4th, whilst Rosberg starts from fifth on the grid. The top five were split by only seven tenths of a second.

Glock posted the sixth fastest time, leading an alternation of Toyotas and Ferrari. Glock in sixth, Massa 7th, Trulli 8th and Raikkonen 9th. Webber rounded out the top 10, and he's bound to be disappointed to have lost this first battle against Vettel.

Heidfeld posted the 11th fastest time, meaning he can make best use of fuel strategy, with Alonso behind him in 12th. Not great from Renault, but compared to Piquet down in 17th – Fernando has got to be somewhat happy with that. Nakajima lines up in 13th, proving that more work is needed on qualifying performance from him. Kovalainen is 14th, just ahead of Hamilton, who set no time in the second session.



The final five on the grid are Buemi, Piquet, Fisichella, Sutil and Bourdais. No major surprises there, although it must be very disappointing to be Bourdais and find your rookie teammate not just ahead of you, but almost half a second ahead of you.

Adjustments

Of course, it's never that simple, is it? Whilst we were busy celebrating the impressive Brawn GP story, and taking bets on how many times we'll here the phrase "greatest comeback since Lazarus" everything changed.

Firstly, McLaren confirmed that Hamilton would have to change his gearbox, meaning he takes a five place grid drop from the 15th place he achieved in qualifying. That puts him squarely at the back of the pack, with a lot of work to do in the race.

Then, Toyota were stripped of their qualifying times. Originally they posted sixth and eighth, both drivers have been sent to the back of the grid due to a flexible rear wing infringement. The team have confirmed they are working through the night to fix it, and don't anticipate it being a problem for tomorrow, or even having an effect on their performance. However, it does mean that Lewis now moves up to 18th, with Trulli and Glock behind him, in that order. It's slightly unfair on Glock, who qualified ahead of Trulli, but presumably lines up behind him due to the entry list order.

One final bit of news, that turned out to be non-news, Williams put in a protest against the Ferrari and Red Bull cars, citing a complaint about their sidepods. However, after a couple of hours, they withdrew the protest, saying it was in the best interests of the sport. Probably wasn't in the best interests of the stewards, though, who had wasted a few hours examining the data.

Fuel Loads

For 2009, the FIA have mandated that race fuel weights have to be published before Sunday, meaning we can see at a glance who is running light, and who is fuelled to the brim. This gives us a good idea of how the qualifying performances stack up, and an insight into what might happen in the race tomorrow.

Brawn GP were the heaviest of the top ten, proving their performance is not just a fluke, or a low fuel run. Button is slightly lighter than Barrichello, which explains the reversal in positions compared to the previous two qualifying sessions. Kubica is the lightest man on the grid, whilst teammate Heidfeld is in a good position, having qualified 11th, stocked up with fuel, and then been bumped up to 9th. The only driver heavier than Nick is Piquet, who starts in 14th. Hamilton, back in 18th, is running an aggressive strategy, fuelled very light, presumably to try and make his way through the field. Bourdais has also chosen a much lighter fuel load compared to Buemi, perhaps hoping to make it at least the four places up to match his teammate, even if he can't beat him.

From the Comments

Despite all the kerfuffle, we had a few comments about how good the sessions were, with Lou – the die-hard Button fan - saying: "Best qualifying ever." Jon agreed with: "Flip-ping amazing."

Meanwhile, Gavin gave us a quick rundown of the new BBC coverage, saying: "Love the intro, love the commentators, love the coverage, love the fact that F1 has been turned on its head. The BBC coverage is light years ahead of what ITV ever did and they really got it right with their choice of commentators and presenters. The action on the track was (caps lock on) CRAZY, and if the rest of the season is half as good as today then we are in for a fantastic season."

Team by Team



Let's start with Toyota then, and the team quotes are already out of date with the changes. However, John Howett has spoken after the penalty was handed out and says: "I'm a bit disappointed, but in the end we are at the premier level of world motorsport. Competitors have the right to protest and we expect the regulator to enforce the rules. On my side, there are no sour grapes." He added that they are seeking clarification from the FIA whether the cars have to start at the back of the grid, or if they can start from the pit lane, as this will affect their strategy enormously.

Moving on to BMW and Kubica is pretty happy with his fourth on the grid. He says: "Looking at the first practice sessions of the weekend, this was more than we expected. We made progress with the car, and I was able to put in some really good laps." He also mentions that Rosberg put dust on the track in front of him, otherwise he might have been able to pick up third. Let it go, Kub, let it go. Heidfeld gives us plenty of insight into his strategy: "Eleventh is certainly not what I was aiming for after the winter tests were quite promising, but at least it is an advantage compared to tenth because I am now free to choose my fuel load. Using the KERS might be a small advantage just after the start, although here the straight before the first corner isn't really long."

For Williams, Rosberg adds to the KERS conversation with: "The start tomorrow of course will be important, but thankfully we don't have too many cars running KERS close by us and possibly challenging us off the line. The big factor tomorrow will be tyres, but I think we have a good strategy and positive reliability, so we have all the tools to do a good job in the race." Nakajima admits the car is good enough to get into Q3, but that he made a small mistake, which cost him time.

Alonso is admitting defeat a little early on in the weekend, saying: "We arrived here to fight for the podium, but this might not be the case tomorrow. I'm disappointed as I thought I could be fifth or sixth on the grid." He does add that last year he moved up from 12th to 4th, so anything can happen. Piquet says he isn't enjoying the track at Albert Park and is struggling through a difficult weekend.

Before the five-place grid drop, Lewis said: "Something broke on the rear of my car on my second flying lap in Q1. I just lost all drive in the gearbox and couldn't continue. The team will look at the problem tonight and I'm determined to drive an attacking race - we'll have some fun from 15th tomorrow." Presumably, he'll have even more fun from 18th! Heikki is looking to the future, saying: "The team has worked so hard, and we have made progress over the past few weeks so it gives us all a lot of hope that we will get back to the front before too long."

Vettel has got to be happy with third after such a disastrous few days. He says: "At times we have even wondered if we would make it to Q2, so now we are third on the second row of the grid, I'm looking forward to tomorrow. This is a good starting point." Webber isn't impressed with his last lap performance: "My previous flying laps had gone well, so I would have liked a better result, but that's where we are so we'll try to make something from the race." Team Principal Christian Horner adds that he's impressed with Mark's performance, considering the broken leg and all.

Ferrari posted the 7th and 9th fastest times in qualifying, although are 6th and 7th, thanks to Toyota. Massa is adamant that they couldn't have got higher, saying: "We reckoned it would be possible but very difficult to get into the top five, and this turned out to be the case: we ended up seventh, which is definitely the best we could do this afternoon." Raikkonen is turning his attention towards tomorrow: "From what we have seen today, clearly we lack a bit of performance compared to the quickest guys, but the race will be very long and we will see what we can manage to do."

Bourdais doesn't seem that disappointed with his performance, despite making mistakes. He suggests the car isn't too bad, and after a small error on his second run, his third was ruined by a slow outlap that meant his tyres weren't up to temperature. Buemi was a bit overawed by his first qualifying session but pretty pleased, he said: "I have taken confidence from what I have done so far and feel I am going to be capable of doing this job, even if I am quite young." How refreshing to find a rookie that still needs a little bit of encouragement.



For Force India, both drivers are a little disappointed, with Sutil changing his goal to simply be making it to the end of the race tomorrow. Fisichella, meanwhile, is picking out the positives from their sessions: “We knew that it would be difficult today, but considering what we have done so far this year, with the limited pre-season testing, being just two tenths slower than the 2008 world champion is a good result.” And now they get to start ahead of him as well, I bet they are chuffed.

Now we come to Brawn GP, and Barrichello is only slightly disappointed. He says: “I was hoping I could put the car on pole and it was looking good in the first two sessions, but in Q3 I developed some understeer. However, the first row for both cars is a real credit to the team and gives us a great chance in the race tomorrow.” Finally, for our pole sitter Jenson Button, happy doesn’t quite do it justice: “To put the car on pole at our debut race is a fantastic achievement. To go from a situation where you don’t even know if you are going to be racing to achieving pole at the first race of the season is just incredible. Tomorrow is obviously the most important day of the weekend and there is a lot of work to be achieved to come away with a successful result, however we have to remember where we have been and really enjoy this moment.”

Quote of the Day

That is all for this episode of F1 Digest – it’s been an absolutely manic day, and I’m hoping tomorrow is just exciting, if a little less filled with stewards reports. I will leave you with a quote from Sebastien Buemi, who proves that qualifying isn’t just crazy for us watching at home:

“I have to say I found the pace at which qualifying happens rather quick! You go out, you come back, you change tyres, you go out again. You need to stay relaxed.”