



F1 Digest 2009 – Malaysia Preview

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The Australian GP brought us back into the F1 world with a bump, bringing great action, the usual surprises, and unfortunate controversies. Is it possible Malaysia can keep up the excitement?

Vital Statistics

This weekend plays host to the Malaysian GP at the Sepang International Circuit. The race will occur on the 5th April around a track which is 5.5km long, and translates to 56 laps. Malaysia is known for hosting one of the hardest races weather-wise, with heat and humidity the name of the game. However, there are plenty of forecasts suggesting that rain will be on the cards over the weekend. The lap record at Sepang is a 1:34.2 held by Juan-Pablo Montoya, whilst Pole Position last year was Felipe Massa with a 1:35.7. The fastest lap during the race in 2008 was posted by Nick Heidfeld with a 1:35.4.

2008 in 30 Seconds

Qualifying at Sepang in 2008 caused it's own controversy, as Hamilton and Kovalainen slowed their McLaren's down, having completed their fast laps. They got right in the way of Alonso and Heidfeld and were both docked five places. This meant the race was a Ferrari walkover, with Massa on pole, although he spun his Ferrari midway through, handing the win to teammate Kimi Raikkonen. Other than that, it was mostly uneventful. The final podium was Kimi, Kubica and Kovalainen.

From the Comments

RG is looking forward to the season really kicking off from here: "April is a brilliant month in general, mainly for the fact that the racing really gets going with Malaysia, China and Bahrain. The race will determine if Brawn's pace was a one off, and to be sure that the disappointing teams, Ferrari and McLaren included, can pick themselves up after by all standards not being very quick over the weekend." Mr C is also hoping that Sepang can give us some real answers: "After the mayhem of the streets, F1 heads to a proper venue, a place built for one purpose, to race. And with a proper racetrack comes the opportunity to figure out who's got pace and who's got to find some. Off-track, for the second weekend in a row it looks like F1 is set for more controversy. The stewards have likely already run out of appeals notices, and we've only seen one chequered flag this season."

I mentioned that it might rain, earlier, and Lukeh things it's going to mix things up: "I think the weather may have a big part to play this weekend with the race, and if it does, it'll give us a good idea what to expect from the cars in such conditions. Ferrari always seem to perform in Malaysia so I'm expecting we'll see them a bit more prominently but it wouldn't surprise me if we continue to see a nice mixed field of cars up and down the grid in the same way Australia provided." Scott adds to the weather topic with: "After an amazing season opener the F1 circus now makes the trip to the sweltering humidity of Malaysia. While the Sepang circuit presents its own challenges, the big test is coping with the strenuous conditions. It's hot, humid and sticky but usually a monsoon is never far away! With the prospect of rain coming, this could dramatically level the playing field and make for a stunning continuation of the championship. In that case, I'd better start learning a rain dance for the weekend!"

Vinnchan is looking forward to seeing who is competitive: "We'll see if Red Bull really is the closest contenders to the Brawn GP cars, we'll see if McLaren have any pace, and we'll see if KERS really does make a difference in a more traditional circuit."



Finally, Gavin also thinks KERS will come to the fore: “Looking forward to an interesting race - I think this race will provide a better indication of where the teams lie in terms of performance. I also think that we will see KERS making more of a difference due to the long straights. It’s good that the race is on later than usual so we don’t have to get up at silly o’clock to watch it - and I’m hoping for rain as that always gives us an exciting race!”

Team by Team

Brawn GP are still coming down from their Australian 1-2 high. Button gives us a good introduction to the troubles Malaysia can bring: “The Malaysian Grand Prix is always one of the toughest races of the season and it will be a real challenge for our new car with so little testing under our belts. Malaysia has a really hot and humid climate which really tests the car's durability and coupled with the frequent torrential downpours can make for an unpredictable race weekend.” Barrichello adds to this: “The intense heat puts pressure on the engine, brakes and the drivers as the temperature can rise about 50 degrees in the cockpit, so you have to be well-prepared and ensure you are fully-hydrated.”

From a team flying high, to another knowing they’ve got work to do, McLaren are realistic. The only Hamilton quotes I have are from before his penalty, and having been stripped of his race result in Australia, he’s probably not in a great mood. However, he wasn’t getting carried away beforehand, so maybe he’ll just see it as the season starting now. Meanwhile, Kovalainen is preparing himself for a tough race: “In the car, you’ve not only got to find the optimum balance, but also make sure the brakes and cooling are efficient, otherwise you’ll be in trouble before you get to the end of the race. The only difficulty for me is the heat; coming from Finland, we often see the same temperature-readings – but with a minus in front!”

Both Williams drivers are worried what the conditions will be like in Sepang. Rosberg has already hit headlines this week with: “In Melbourne I found this a big concern as towards the end of the race the visibility was very poor, which increased the danger in my view as it was more likely that you could make a mistake. I'd rather the race changed back to its original start time or became a proper night race - that would improve matters a lot.” And Nakajima adds: “It was difficult with the low sunlight in Australia, especially as the light flickered and changed under the tree cover. We won't have this type of shadow at Sepang, but there is a different issue which is the possibility of reduced light conditions mixed with the likelihood of rain.”

BMW will be enjoying a home race of sorts, as major sponsor Petronas will be bringing in the fans. Therefore, both drivers are hoping to do well, but Kubica also enjoys the race for its corners. He said: “This is a unique track with a wide variety of corners; some are seriously quick, but others are very slow. And in some places you can choose different lines, which makes it particularly interesting.” Meanwhile, Heidfeld adds to the weather worries: “We've often experienced cloudbursts in Malaysia in the late afternoon and early evening. This year's schedule increases the chances that we will still be on the track at this time. Hopefully it will still be light enough.”

For Renault, Alonso is putting his priorities on Saturday and the early part of the race: “In Australia we struggled in qualifying and our race suffered as a result. So we need to make sure we qualify well so that we can have a strong race. We also need to make sure we get the most from our KERS system at the start of the race as there is a long run to the first corner where it should make a big difference.” Alonso has been suffering from flu, though, and was released from his Thursday duties so he could rest up for Friday practice. Piquet is putting Australia down as a learning experience: “I've already put Melbourne behind me and I'm fully focused on coming back with a strong weekend in Sepang. We know we need to improve our performance, but we also learnt a lot about the R29 in Melbourne and we will use that information during free practice to try and find a better balance with the car.”

Next up Toyota, who haven’t been out of the headlines this week. It’s now time to focus on the race ahead, and Trulli has a positive history in Sepang: “I generally go really well in Malaysia and I have had some strong results there so I am approaching this race with great confidence. We achieved a great breakthrough in Malaysia in 2005 when I



got the team's first podium in Formula 1 so I have good memories which will inspire me this weekend." 2005 was a long time ago, though, wasn't it? Glock is a little less confident, saying: "I don't have much experience of racing in Malaysia because I was taken out so early last year, but from the practice and qualifying I know the conditions are quite extreme. It's also pretty tough on the cars and tyres as well but I can adapt quickly to different conditions and different tracks so I'm ready for the challenge."

Ferrari admitted almost immediately after Australia was over that they had a lack of pace. Boss Stefano Domenicali said it may have been reliability and driver error that left them with a double DNF in Melbourne, but they just don't have the speed. However, Massa has said they will bounce back in Malaysia. He says: "We need to recover, we need to start scoring points and start the championship in a good way here. And we need to develop the car. It's not such a different start to what I had last year, so we need a similar mentality." Kimi is remaining particularly quiet, but was commandeered to appear in the Thursday press conference, where he said: "Probably the speed is not where we want to be right now but this is a completely different place. It is more like a normal circuit compared to Australia, so we will see how we can do here but I still think that our car is not too bad."

Now, I have no preview quotes from Force India, Red Bull or Toro Rosso, and the only news on any of these teams over the past week is that Helmut Marko feels vindicated by his decision to stick Buemi in the second Toro Rosso seat. Let's hope we see more from him this weekend in Malaysia.

That's it for this preview, then. Enjoy the racing, and don't forget to live comment your way through all the sessions on Sidepodcast.com. You can leave short summaries of the sessions on the blog as well, and they get read out in this very show. I will be back tomorrow with a full rundown of the Free Practice action.

