



## F1 Digest 2009 – Malaysia Free Practice

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This is F1 Digest – Malaysia Free Practice.

With the stewards keeping busy, and showing no signs of letting up, we turn our attention to the track and enjoy some action in Sepang.

### Free Practice 1

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We all know that Malaysia is hot and the humidity is a nightmare, and Friday at Sepang was no different. The track was at 32 degrees C, with the air a few degrees lower at 28, whilst the humidity was pushing 70%.

The Force India boys hit the track first, as they always do, and gradually all filed out of the pitlane to complete their installation laps. We saw our first glimpse of how Fridays are more like test days for the teams now, as Kovalainen was running some flow-vis paint. It was white rather than the normal green colour, and we don't know whether they learnt much about the aero flow using it, but if they did, chances are so did all their competitors.

Fifteen minutes in and just Kimi was left to get a feel of the tarmac, but when he did head out on track, he went straight for a lap time, setting the first of the session. During his next lap, Kimi ran wide, and we heard him on the radio to his mechanics telling them not to talk to him in the midst of a corner. The Ferrari wasn't the only car spotted off track, though, as Trulli spun it, followed by teammate Glock. Kubica also had a quick taste of the gravel, and then Glock spun it again. Whilst both Williams boys were putting in strong times, Massa, Fisichella and Kovalainen all struggled as they locked up their tyres during a lap.

The Force India's early start was benefitting them, as Fisichella conquered his tyres to pick up the third fastest time, whilst Button jumped into the top spot. Both Red Bull drivers moved up into the top ten, whilst Heidfeld couldn't seem to haul himself out of 20<sup>th</sup>. Eventually, he managed it, dropping Kovalainen to last place.

Excitement occurred when Raikkonen was in the midst of a fast lap, when some kind of smoke started pouring out of the cockpit. It looked to be the fire extinguisher within the car, and the smoke was billowing around Kimi and through the car, out the exhausts as well. He cruised back to the pitlane, but didn't make it all the way to the garage. Kimi pulled the Ferrari to a stop safely within the white line of the pit lane, and then hopped out of the car, looking at it in disgust. It turns out this was not particularly nice smelling gas, and the Ferrari mechanics donned gloves and face masks to deal with the car afterwards.

In the next door McLaren garage, both cars were spotted stripped down to their very tubs, clearly the flow-vis pointing out some serious flaws. A few last minute attempts at a fast lap, and the session was over.

### Results

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Rosberg jumped to the top of the timesheets at the end of the session, making it four free practices in a row that he has led. This time, teammate Nakajima was right behind him, just four hundredths of a second off Nico's time which was 1:36.260. In fact, the top 15 places were split by only a second.

Button was third, with Barrichello behind him, and continuing the team by team tradition, the Brawns were followed by the Ferrari's, Massa ahead of Raikkonen.

Hamilton finished the morning in 7<sup>th</sup>, with a 1:36.699, and the first to break the team mate spell, as he was followed by Webber and then Vettel, Glock and then Trulli. Then the order gets mixed up with Fisichella in 12<sup>th</sup>, the first to



drop into the 1:37s. Kubica ended up in 13<sup>th</sup> with Piquet behind in 14<sup>th</sup>. Teammate Alonso was down in 16<sup>th</sup>, the pair split by Sutil. Alonso is still struggling with his flu and ear infection, and the team were definitely taking it easy on him.

Buemi lined up 17<sup>th</sup> with a 1:37.634, Heidfeld behind just one hundredth slower. Bourdais was down in the 1:38s with Kovalainen finishing up the timesheets on a 1:38.483.

## Free Practice 2

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By the time the afternoon session was about to get underway, the humidity was falling, down to 55%. Both air and track temperatures were much higher though, at 33 and 45 degrees respectively. Although there were no specific forecasts of rain, the sky didn't look particularly promising.

There was no hanging about to set lap times during this session, and we were looking at Kovalainen at the top almost immediately. Clearly the teams were worried about the weather, but they kept on going round. Within ten minutes, everyone had set a lap time and news from the pit lane suggested some fat drops of rain were starting to fall.

It mostly held off, though, and the teams continued to circle. Whilst we were concentrating on the weather Hamilton snuck into the top spot, only to be knocked down by Kovalainen, and the pair of them held off Button, Rosberg and Vettel. The McLaren seemed to be much improved on the morning. Trulli slipped into first, and then Sutil jumped to second, although he was introducing the softer tyre into the equation.

The rain was creeping slowly towards the track, whilst the cars were heading off it, both Renaults, Trulli, and Bourdais spent a lot of time course correcting. Barrichello also spent some time running wide, whilst the BMWs didn't appear to be going fast enough to spin off. They are renowned for not running for headlines during practice though. The first proper crash of the day was down to Fisichella, who found himself unable to turn the car, and headed straight over the gravel and into the barrier. It was a fast impact, but he climbed out of the car fine, if a little embarrassed.

Meanwhile, the Ferrari boys were battling for the fastest time with first Massa clinging to the top spot, then Raikkonen clawing it back. Once Kimi was on top, though, it seemed as though times could not be improved upon, and the session drew to a close.

## Results

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Ferrari improved their times from this morning with Kimi on a 1:35.7 and Massa on a 1:35.8. Vettel was the only other driver to make it into the 1:35s, and then Rosberg was the fourth fastest – dropping into the 1:36s. Webber ended the day in 5<sup>th</sup> place, Barrichello was 6<sup>th</sup> with Button in 7<sup>th</sup>.

Nakajima was next. The Japanese driver completed 35 laps, compared to the next place Kovalainen who chalked up 40. That was the joint highest tally along with Raikkonen and Vettel. Piquet was in 10<sup>th</sup>, with Hamilton a tenth behind him in 11<sup>th</sup>. Trulli finished the day in 12<sup>th</sup> and Buemi a tenth behind in 13<sup>th</sup>.

Glock was just 1,000<sup>th</sup> of a second ahead of Alonso, in 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> respectively, whilst Sutil led Kubica and Bourdais. The final two spots were taken by Fisichella and Heidfeld, with the German over two seconds off leader Raikkonen's time.

## From the Comments

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Gavin was intrigued by Kimi's reliability problems today: "Interesting to see the first KERS failure to cause a car stop on track - I thought that if KERS failed the car could keep running, but evidently not. Anyways, I'm looking forward to a good weekend of action and I have my fingers crossed for a wet race as they are always exciting!" However, RG thinks the second session made the red cars look a little better: "Erm, all that shows us is that Rosberg really does like practice and I think Ferrari were trying to prove a point in FP2, show the world they still are quick. For qually, who knows?" And Mr C adds to the KERS talk: "This morning in Sepang, Kimi turned exiting a car into an art form. It took but one and a bit race weekends to witness a KERS malfunction and this one ended spectacularly. It leaves the team who topped Friday's timesheets in something of a quandary, they may be fast, but at what cost?"

Looking forward, now, Jon says: "Yet again, I have no idea who's going to be on pole, who's going to win the race and who's doing badly....ITS GREAT!!" Whilst Bassano isn't impressed with the recent FIA interventions: "Why don't we ask the FIA to publish the results now, so we get on with the business of racing fast cars again?" Scott gives us his predictions for qualifying: "My top 3 bet for qualifying looks to be Button, Raikkonen and Rosberg. Mind you, this is for a dry session. If it rains I have absolutely no idea where this pole position will swing."

### Team by Team

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We'll start with Toro Rosso who finished the day in 13th and 18th. Not particularly impressive, but it sounds like they were just getting themselves used to the track. Buemi says: "I drove here last year in GP2, so I know the track. It's different of course in an F1 car but no problem. The heat is not bothering me and you just have to make sure you drink a bit more to cope with the sweating." Lovely. Bourdais, on the other hand, was working hard on the car setup, and found the weather slightly detrimental: "As was the case here last year, the track improved a lot between the start and finish of the first session and then again in the second. It was a dramatic change and the few drops of rain that fell did not help us in understanding the situation."

For Toyota, Glock is making progress. He says: ""It has been quite a tricky day for me today. The car this morning didn't feel quite right and I had some trouble with the stability, then at the beginning of second practice I was getting some oversteer and the car felt light. But we worked on some different set-ups and by the end of the day it was feeling better." And Trulli also thinks they are making progress: "If you look at the timing sheets we don't look as competitive as I expected before coming here but I think the car is definitely there and it is just a matter of getting the right direction on set-up. The soft tyres seem to be pretty competitive and they were faster but the hard ones were a little bit too hard." Is that the exact opposite problem of last weekend then?

Force India have a lot of work to do, and Sutil has already admitted that getting in to the second session of qualifying is going to be a big ask. However, he feels like the team had a productive day today, and the setup is going in the right direction. Fisichella is also worried about qualifying-style short runs: "We are still finding the best compromise under braking as there is front locking and poor grip and traction so we have to work a lot to make the balance work for us. Over the longer runs it doesn't look too bad however."

Williams had yet another good couple of Free Practice sessions, and ended the day with Nico in 4<sup>th</sup> and Kazuki in 8<sup>th</sup>. Nico believes that the team have made some good progress on what appears to be the main problem: "We also completed a good tyre test which is important as I think we now have a good idea of what is going on with the tyres for this circuit." Nakajima is looking ahead to qualifying and the race: "Whether we are as quick relatively as we were in Melbourne remains to be seen, but certainly we are far further ahead than we were here last year and we'll keep pushing on tomorrow and see what more we can find."

Over at Red Bull, Webber is happy that things have improved from last weekend: "Today was a lot better for us in terms of reliability than Friday in Melbourne so it was a big step forward. Both cars ran well and obviously it's a big challenge for the cars around here with the heat, so that's good. We got all of our programme completed in plenty



of time.” Vettel agrees that they got lots of lovely laps under their belts and with no major car problems, this can be summed up as a good day.

McLaren, however, have clearly not had a good day. They’ve suspended sporting chief Dave Ryan, and both Lewis and Martin Whitmarsh had to face the press with regards to the misleading of the Australian Stewards. This reflects in Hamilton’s end of day quotes as he simply says: “We still need a bit more grip but our balance, particularly through the high-speed stuff, felt good. The car felt stronger than I expected.” Clearly a man with other things on his mind. Heikki seems in a slightly better mood, saying: “As we started pushing, the car started to move around quite a bit and was more difficult to drive. But our consistency over the long run looks quite promising. I just need some aircon in the car – it’s totally boiling!”

BMW finished the day 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, and Heidfeld can understand how things may not seem very encouraging from the outside: “Certainly the results don’t look good, but in Melbourne it was a similar picture on Friday. Nevertheless we do have some work to do in order to improve the balance of the car. In the first session I was running with the KERS and in the second I didn’t use the device.” BMW have confirmed that they have yet to decide whether to run the system in Sepang, presumably FP3 may make all the difference. Having made good tyre decisions last weekend, Kubica said they focused on race preparation today, and learning how the tyres adapt to the different needs of the circuit.

Poor Fernando Alonso isn’t feeling very well this weekend. Apparently recovering from flu, and certainly suffering with an ear infection, he took today pretty easily. Although of course, it wasn’t easy. He says: “We tried not to do too many laps today as I wasn’t feeling 100%. It’s a very demanding weekend in terms of the heat because we sweat so much, but it was important that we still got enough information.” He’s hoping to rest up tonight, to feel better in qualifying, and then be fighting fit for the race. Most of the data came from Piquet, then, who ended the day in 10<sup>th</sup>. He’s relatively pleased with the improvement over his Melbourne pace and within the car itself.

Barrichello has had to have his gearbox changed, and will therefore drop five places from wherever he qualifies tomorrow. However, he is satisfied with their days work, echoing the thoughts of others that tyre preparation is key. Button says the same but has been struggling: “My biggest problem was that we are locking the tyres and brakes very easily so we need to have a good look at this. We’re not quite there yet but we are going in the right direction and I’m confident we will achieve the optimum setup ready for qualifying tomorrow.”

We finish with Ferrari, who topped the day, finishing 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. Kimi brushes his incident under the carpet saying: “This morning we had a problem with the KERS, which cost us a bit of time, but we managed to make up for most of it in the afternoon.” Meanwhile, Massa is letting himself be maybe just a little optimistic: “Clearly, looking at the time sheet today, there’s a slight feeling of relief, even if it has to be treated with caution. We are very motivated and the whole team will be trying it’s best.”

### Quote of the Day

That’s all for this show. Don’t forget Sidepodcast.com is there for all your live commenting needs during each session of a race weekend. The conversation is always lively and fun, even when it’s crazy o’clock in the morning. I will be back tomorrow with a roundup of the qualifying action, and I will leave you with this from Sebastian Vettel:

“The heat in Malaysia is always a surprise, even if you’re here for a couple of days before you jump in the car. It’s very hot with the suit and everything and, no matter how much you prepare, the first outing is always a bad surprise.”