



F1 Digest 2009 – Malaysia Qualifying

Welcome to F1 Digest 2009 – Malaysia Qualifying.

Ferrari looked to be much improved, but Rosberg still maintained good Free Practice pace. Who would make it work on Saturday though?

Free Practice 3

By the time FP3 got going, the humidity was hovering around 63% and the air temperature was at 31 degrees C. The track was up to 40 degrees.

With plenty of rain clouds signalling that a downpour may not be far away, most cars headed out for an installation lap immediately. In fact, it took just three minutes for everyone to have been out once, but then of course, it all went quiet.

Glock was first out to set a time, and Trulli joined him. Sutil also hit the track, and set an early benchmark, taking the fastest time that Button, Massa and Piquet couldn't beat. Barrichello finally knocked him off the top. The Brawns dominated for the majority of the session, and the sky just got darker and darker.

A small controversy emerged as McLaren were caught on camera spraying their tyres with something from a can. Both Bridgestone and the FIA headed on over to find out what they were up to, but it turns out they were trying to find a puncture.

Meanwhile, Heidfeld posted the fastest time, Massa slipped into second, but Button came along and blew them all out the water. Most drivers bolted on the softer tyre and had another go, Barrichello went fastest, then Raikkonen, then Rosberg, who just beat out Massa. No one managed to top Nico's time.

Results

Five out of six for Nico then as he tops yet another Free Practice timesheet. The Williams posted a 1:35.9 which was just a tenth of a second ahead of Webber in second. Massa was third, with Trulli and Glock behind him. The Toyotas were the two hardest working men on track, with Jarno completing 21 laps and Glock one more with 22. The top 14 today were split by just over a second, with Vettel 6th and Kimi just behind in 7th.

Nakajima completed 18 laps to finish 8th, whilst the Brawn boys finished next to each other, Barrichello just three hundredths ahead of Button. Kubica ended the morning in 11th, whilst teammate Heidfeld – who had decided to run KERS after deliberating yesterday – was down in 15th. Between them, Hamilton, Kovalainen and Alonso. Piquet was in 16th, having completed 18 laps, the same number as Sutil, just behind him in 17th.

The Toro Rossos were next to each other, Buemi just ahead of Bourdais, and last came Fisichella with a 1:37.398.

Qualifying

The track and air temperature were on the way down by the time qualifying got going, 40 and 30 degrees C respectively. The humidity, however, was on the way up, 76%. The first session got underway with those worried about rain heading out first, Williams, Toro Rosso, Raikkonen and Sutil. Nakajima set the first and fastest time, knocked down by teammate Rosberg, and then Raikkonen, who had run wide on his first lap and needed to bank a decent time.



When the Brawn cars hit the track, Button slipped into first with Barrichello third, who then improved to first. Alonso left it to the halfway mark to come out of the pitlane, and ran very wide off track, but still posted tenth.

With just a few minutes to go, both Ferrari drivers, Nakajima and Button all opt to stay in the garages, whilst the others battle it out for a decent laptime. Unfortunately for Massa, he gradually slipped further and further down. Vettel, Webber, Heidfeld, Barrichello, Kubica, all popped up there, and finally, Massa was 16th with no option to try and improve. Raikkonen was lucky, as he ended up 14th. Buemi was running his final lap, three tenths up on getting out of the drop zone, but ran off into the gravel, ruining his opportunity. He was heard on the radio, whining to his team that he just missed out.

The fastest three were Barrichello, Trulli and Glock, whilst dropping out were Massa, Piquet, Fisichella, Sutil and Buemi.

Clearly learning from their first session mistake, Kimi was one of the first drivers to go out, but ended up third on the first run of laps, with Kubica ahead of Nakajima. After a whole heap of action, Button suddenly pulled out the fastest lap time we've seen so far, a 1:33.784.

With just minutes to go, we were watching both McLaren's, Raikkonen and Glock, who were all towards the bottom. Raikkonen clawed his way out to sixth, as did Glock. However, neither McLaren could manage it. Alonso managed to slip into tenth, which knocked Heidfeld out of the top ten.

The fastest three at the end of the session were Button, Trulli and Webber, whilst we lost: Heidfeld, Nakajima, Hamilton, Kovalainen and Bourdais.

The final session, then, and we were keeping our eye on pole position, of course, but also where Vettel and Barrichello could finish, as they need to keep it high to minimise their respective penalties. Kimi was out first again, Button setting the first benchmark ahead of Barrichello and Rosberg.

Trulli jumped up to first, and then went even faster on his second consecutive lap. When the final batch of laps began, Alonso decided to remain in the garage, clearly feeling he couldn't improve on tenth. Raikkonen jumped up to fourth, then Barrichello went quickest but he made a mistake on his lap which meant Button could easily grab the top spot.

With just Vettel and Trulli to finish then, the German slipped into second, and then the Italian did the exact same thing, pushing Vettel down to third. The chequered flag dropped.

Results

With the two penalties taken into account, here's the lineup for the race on Sunday. Button on pole, with Trulli lining up beside him on the grid. Glock makes it a strong qualifying for the Toyotas in third, with Rosberg fourth. Webber has managed to outqualify his teammate, but only because of the ten place drop. Kubica starts sixth, with Raikkonen 7th and Alonso 8th. Barrichello's new gearbox puts him down to ninth, with Heidfeld bumped into the top ten for the second week in a row.

The second half of the grid starts with Nakajima, who is ahead of Hamilton and then the demoted Vettel. Kovalainen starts where he actually qualified, then, in 14th, with Bourdais just behind him. Massa is going to have a lot of work to do from 16th. Piquet is behind him in 17th, with Fisichella, Sutil and Buemi completing the grid.

Fuel Loads



The most stark fuel strategy for tomorrow is Vettel, who is fuelled much, much lighter than everyone else. Clearly he was trying to get pole position, and as that didn't quite work, he now starts 13th and will have to pit long before anyone else. The Brawn GP cars continue to show how fast they are, as they have a respectable fuel load, with Button able to go slightly longer than Trulli, and Barrichello fuelled just slightly longer again.

The heaviest car is Heidfeld, with Massa also employing the same tactic – fuel them long and see how much you can gain in the early stages of the race. Notably, both McLaren's are on essentially the same fuel load, with just the super-light Vettel between them, so we may see an inter-team battle down in 12th.

2nd through to 4th seem to be running on almost the same fuel so that will also be a battle worth watching.

From the Comments

RG enjoyed today's action, saying: "Button is good, those Toyota's are pretty good, Red Bull's are fantastic, with better diffusers they could challenge for wins definitely. BMW, Ferrari average. Unless you count Massa's howler, bit of a mess up. McLaren really are slow and I now love Buemi."

Guille2306 has also been eyeing up who was fast: "Although in Q2 the Brawns seemed to have a much stronger pace than the rest, it seems that with fuel load they don't have the advantage they had in Melbourne. The Toyotas showed that they're there for real, while the Williams are fast in qualy but seem to lack some race pace with fuel load." Gavin looks back to Australia as well: "Great to see that the performance levels from Australia are apparent in Malaysia too. I expect to see a crowded first corner tomorrow as the cars with KERS are at the back and will be arriving into turn 1 very fast. Here's hoping for a bit of rain into the mix too so we have an exciting race. C'mon Jenson!"

Finally, Dom looks ahead at what might happen on Sunday: "It should be a very open race tomorrow. It'll be interesting to see exactly what the Toyota's can do now that they're starting alongside their rivals, instead of in the pit lane, and it'll be interesting to watch Vettel and Rubens make their way up the order. Jenson probably won't have too much trouble staying in front though, unless it rains, in which case just about anybody is in with a chance..."

Team by Team

Let's start with Toyota, then, as they seem to be the team to watch right now. Trulli is very happy with his second on the grid: "The team has done a fantastic job, we stayed away from traffic and the car was feeling good, so it has been a very successful day for us. The car feels strong now but I have to admit I wasn't sure I would be in this position after practice yesterday because it was quite difficult. I worked hard with my engineers to analyse the data and make some improvements to the set-up and we got it spot-on in qualifying." Glock is pleased with his third position, but did find qualifying a bit frustrating as he made a few mistakes. Must be a pretty quick car then.

For Red Bull, Vettel is pragmatic about what he can achieve: "I have the penalty and there's nothing I can do about that. The secret is just to focus on what I'm here to do and I'm here to race, so that's what we do. It will be a very tough day tomorrow, but I'm looking forward to it and nothing is impossible. I'm hoping for some rain, as that can mix things up quite a lot, but let's see." Webber is amazed at how close the sessions were: "That was quite an enjoyable session. It would be nice to have a bit more of a cushion between us and the other cars, but that's not what it's about at the moment and seventh is the best I could do."

Hamilton is playing the long game: "We qualified about where we expected to. We don't yet have the pace to get into Q3 but the balance doesn't feel too bad - we're just unable to carry enough speed through the corners. We expect to see some improvements over the next two or three races." For tomorrow he's just going to do what he can to score points. Heikki says the same with: "The balance today wasn't completely to my liking, but I did my best and I'm looking forward to an enjoyable battle in the race tomorrow."



Over at Renault, Alonso is feeling better: “I had no temperature this morning so I was in better condition to drive the car. Our result today is a bit disappointing because I expected to be fifth or sixth in qualifying, but overall the car is better than in Australia, although we’re not fast enough and need to improve.” Piquet knows where he went wrong and why he’s back in 17th: “It could have worked out better for me this afternoon, but on my final lap I pushed a bit too hard at the end of the lap and lost three or four tenths, which proved costly.”

Bourdais is surprisingly upbeat about the car, despite qualifying 15th: “We were quicker than expected in qualifying which is great, even if we are still not where we want to be. I would expect that as we develop the car more, maybe by the time we get to Spain we can be thereabouts.” He’s not sure about whether he wants it to rain during the race, but concedes it would help get points. Buemi agrees: “For tomorrow, the best thing for me would be to have very changeable conditions to see if we could profit from any unusual situation that might develop.”

The Ferrari drivers are starting from almost opposite ends of the grid, and Massa is very disappointed. He says: “If I had ended up sixteenth because of a lack of performance, then I could have accepted the result, but like this it hurts even more. The track improved so much with each passing lap and my first run was not perfect and nor was it enough. We did not react in time and lost the chance to have another go.” Kimi says they don’t have the speed anyway, though: “Honestly, the main problem is that, at the moment, we are not quick enough to fight for the top places. The car is not lacking in any particular area, but we do not have enough grip to be as quick as those who finished ahead of us today.”

Force India are another team who are lacking in pace, but Fisichella says he had a mechanical issue: “I had a problem with the throttle pedal on the first run so we changed it and I lost the chance to do three runs, which was very important.” Meanwhile, Sutil suggest he did the best with the car he could, and once again he’s keeping his expectations low: “We did a good job today, we had no problems and this was our pace -we couldn't really have done better. We just need to find some downforce. For tomorrow, I want to have a good race and to get to the finish.”

Kubica is looking ahead to the race, and worrying about where he’s placed on the grid: “I did what I could in the corners, but the straights are long here and give the drivers who are using a KERS a major advantage. I have to start on the dirty side of the track plus I have some cars with a KERS behind me, which will make the start very interesting.” Heidfeld is one of those drivers behind with KERS and says that it does make a difference: “After we did the comparison yesterday I was using the KERS today and it helped, especially in sector one where I was the fastest car for most of the time.”

For Williams, Rosberg is relatively happy with fourth, although he qualified sixth. He says: “From that start position as well as with a good car and a good strategy, we can be optimistic and say we have a good chance to aim for a podium.” Nakajima is feeling very positive about his days work and what is to come: “The car was good, I had a good feeling in the cockpit and everything went okay today, but I just needed to find another tenth to get into Q3. Despite this, I now have the freedom to fuel the car for the optimum strategy, and with this benefit and a good long run pace, a good finish is possible if I keep my head down during the race.”

Finally, pole sitter Button says it wasn’t an easy qualifying and is even more special than Australia: “It's not easy to get one pole but two successive poles is just fantastic and it's a first for me in my Formula One career. It's a great feeling and proves that our car works well on different types of circuit.” Meanwhile, Barrichello congratulates his teammate but says he suffered with understeer, and with the gearbox penalty, tomorrow will be difficult. However, he says: “We know the performance of the car in race conditions is strong and I will be aiming to score as many points as possible tomorrow before I can start chasing for my own pole position and wins.”



Quote of the Day

That's it for this F1 Digest episode. The race tomorrow starts at 10am BST, but we will be opening a live commenting thread early enough to catch the hour long BBC build up as well. I hope you can join us there, but for now, I'll leave you with this quote from Jarno Trulli:

"In a way it's a little disappointing to miss pole position by just a few hundredths but that's how close Formula 1 is at the moment."

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