



F1 Digest 2009 – China Qualifying

Welcome to F1 Digest 2009 – China Qualifying.

After a couple of less than fascinating Free Practice sessions on Friday, Saturday couldn't come quick enough. Here's what happened.

Free Practice 3

The temperatures on Saturday were slightly higher than the first session on Friday, with air at 22 degrees C and track temperature at 32. The sun was beating down and there was no sign of rain.

Two teams were up into the early hours of the morning, as Renault took their KERS device off both cars and fitted a new rear diffuser. BMW also removed KERS from Kubica's car, after his experiments yesterday. Also, Kovalainen was offered up the full choice of options that Hamilton tested out yesterday, but Heikki chose to keep the old front wing.

Glock was the first to head out on the track but he was joined by all the others for their installation laps. Within just four minutes, Nico Rosberg found himself stuck in the gravel at the pitlane entrance. The marshals managed to get the car out of the gravel, and it was pushed back through the paddock and into the pitlane for Nico to continue later on in the session.

Meanwhile, Glock was the first out again for an actual laptime, with Trulli close behind. After just a couple of laps, Glock had to return to the garage with a suspected gearbox problem. Massa topped the timesheets and improved on his next run, whilst Alonso slipped into second.

Halfway through the session, Rosberg returned to the track, and just he, Kovalainen and Button were left without a lap time. Kovi soon rectified that, watching his teammate post the second fastest time, and then managing just 18th himself. He improved to 8th, but still needed some more pace. Rosberg, though, jumped up to top the timesheets, proving that the gravel trap incident wasn't affecting his performance.

The Ferrari's regained the top spot, only to be knocked down by Trulli, and then it was into the last few minutes of the session. Both Red Bull drivers were consigned to the garage with driveshaft problems that were being fixed as a precaution ahead of qualifying. Finally, as is becoming the norm, Rosberg managed to post the fastest time of the session, and no one could beat it.

Results

Nico Rosberg led the first Saturday session, making it six practices out of nine. When will his pace transfer to qualifying and the race? Anyway, his 1:36.133 was closely followed by Trulli on a 1:36.272, who also completed the most laps with 22. Hamilton was third, continuing McLaren's improved form, with Button the highest Brawn driver in 4th. Piquet was in 5th ahead of Massa and Kovalainen. Compared to leader Rosberg's form, Nakajima was disappointingly down in 8th with a 1:36.560, which is of course actually only four tenths off the pace. Raikkonen ended the morning 9th with Barrichello 10th, and then the two BMWs – Heidfeld first, with Kubica four hundredths of a second behind him. The Toro Rossos were split by one tenth, Buemi ahead of Bourdais, then Webber and Vettel by one hundredth with Mark 15th and Sebastian 16th. Towards the bottom, Sutil and Fisichella ended up 17th and 18th respectively, while Alonso was the only driver posting a 1:38, with Glock dead last due to his gearbox problem, and only managing a 1:39.1.

Qualifying



By the time qualifying was ready to get going, the track temperature had risen to 38 degrees, and the air up to 24. Toyota confirmed that Glock would be taking a five place grid penalty due to his gearbox issues.

Fisichella was the first out, on the soft tyre, but his laptime was beaten by Sutil on the harder tyres, and then Buemi and Rosberg also topped it. Both Ferraris were out early, clearly learning from their mistakes at the last race. Vettel set the early benchmark, which was beaten by Button, who was in turn pushed out by Webber. Moments of madness ensued as the drivers crossed the line for their first attempt at a lap, before they dived back into the pits to regroup. Hamilton was leading at the halfway point, which was a surprise, but also, was all about to change.

Barrichello headed out to go quickest, whilst at the bottom, we were worrying about the Toyota and BMW boys who needed to pull a lap together. Trulli and Glock saved themselves, whilst Heidfeld hauled himself out of the drop zone right at the end, dropping Bourdais right in it.

At the end of the session, the fastest three were Button, Barrichello and Webber and we lost Bourdais, Piquet, Kubica, Sutil and Fisichella.

The second session saw Rosberg out first, and as he started his first lap, he had to navigate past a worryingly slow Raikkonen. It didn't look like the Ferrari was just backing off to find space, but moments later he was zipping off again without any problems. Nico set a decent laptime, with Nakajima settling behind him, only to be pushed down by Button, whilst Barrichello took the top spot.

Whilst everyone set their initial laptime, all eyes turned to Vettel who was sitting in the garage, and showing no sign of coming out anytime soon. The time ticked on and he left himself chance to just complete one lap. As the timer counted down, all drivers were out on track, Button went fastest, to be knocked down by Webber.

Buemi jumped up to eighth, whilst Massa gave up on his lap and returned to the garage. Vettel took the top spot, and the session was over.

The fastest three were Vettel, Webber and Barrichello, whilst dropping out were Heidfeld, Kovalainen, Massa, Glock and Nakajima.

As we waited for Q3 to get going, a replay showed that Kovalainen was held up by one of the Red Bulls, which may explain his early exit. We pondered whether there would be any penalties handed out but it seems all quiet on that front.

The final session got underway with Rosberg out first, followed by Trulli and Alonso. Webber posted an early fast time, but was pushed down by Barrichello, whilst Button only managed third. Vettel was leaving it late, once again, as was Hamilton. The McLaren driver completed his lap but it was a tough one and saw him only in seventh.

With just one lap left to settle pole position, Webber posted the fastest time, but Vettel pipped him to the top. The only other driver able to spoil the Red Bull party was Alonso, who came flying round to slip into second.

Results

Vettel gets his second ever pole position, then, denying Webber of his first, and Button of his hat trick. Sebastian completed just 11 laps to achieve the top spot, whilst second place Alonso managed 21. Webber lines up third with Barrichello joining him on the second row – outqualifying Button for the first time this season.

Jenson isn't far behind though, in 6th, with Trulli and Rosberg behind him. Raikkonen will start 8th and Hamilton 9th, whilst Sebastien Buemi had a great afternoon, finishing up in 10th.



The second half of the grid starts with Heidfeld, who gets the benefit of choosing his fuel load, then Kovalainen and Massa. Nakajima qualified 14th just ahead of Glock, who of course gets his five place grid drop that pushes him down to 19th. That promotes Bourdais to 15th, Piquet to 16th and Kubica up to 17th. Sutil starts 18th, then Glock and finally Fisichella lines up last.

Fuel Loads

Firstly, Alonso was running light, which explains his last ditch effort to line up on the front row. Both Red Bulls have a similar fuel load, with Webber maybe slightly heavier. Barrichello and Button though have a strong strategy from 4th and 5th, running the heaviest of the top five.

Piquet down in 16th and Kovalainen in 12th are both running the heaviest fuel loads, whilst both Massa and Bourdais will most likely run long first stints as well.

From the Comments

Scott Woodwiss enjoyed qualifying today: "And I thought Australia's session was good! This one was sensational and full of action. Vettel gambled and won, Alonso did the seemingly impossible, Webber absolutely flew, Barrichello put one over on his teammate and Button now looks a bit worried. The big surprise of the day has to be Fernando, but without KERS will his start be as spectacular as his Malaysian effort? But right now, Vettel, Webber and the RB5 are proving Red Bull truly does have wings and when they use them, they fly!"

Dom has analysed the published weights: "Looking at the fuel loads - Brawn have the fastest car, Toyota have a faster car than quali suggests, Red Bull have a slower car than quali suggests, and Renault are still slow. Nothing much has changed from Malaysia... In the last two races, Jenson has left his first pit stop miles ahead of the driver in second place, so he shouldn't have a problem doing so here. That depends on what Rubens can do though..."

Lady Snowcat has picked up some tips from what she saw today: "It's not great to use up your new super softs before Q3... To run light for quali is good... for quali.... To have a diffuser is better... But the best news is to drive an Adrian Newey miracle car... especially when you can drive like an angel... albeit a rather cheeky angel... And finally you still shouldn't bet against the Brawns..."

Amy was also impressed with the pole sitter today: "Vettel blocked Heikki which made me sad, then he put it on pole which made me happy, then he said 'observatating' which made me laugh."

Team by Team

Toro Rosso are both happy that their sister team is proving the car is good, but disappointed that they can't emulate the success. Buemi had a good day though: "I am really happy to be in Q3, as it's more than I had expected. I don't think I could have got any higher up the order. On low fuel, the car was very good, but we didn't have any new options left for Q3, so I had to do three flying laps on the prime, so considering that, we can be satisfied with this." Bourdais admits fault with his session: "I made a mistake, it's as simple as that. I tried to optimise my line to take Turn 8, but I cut the apex too much and got on the marbles and the dirt on the left side and so the car never really turned in. Because of the dirt on the tyres, the next few corners were a disaster, losing me around half a second."

Despite qualifying 9th, Hamilton is impressed with the progress being made: "They were pretty hardcore laps! They were almost beyond the limit. Step by step, we are moving forward. And thanks to all the guys back at the factory for doing such a fantastic job and for churning away on all the new parts - every little bit helps us catch the leaders." Heikki's goal for the race is simple: "With the right strategy and some better luck in the opening laps, I'll be aiming for my first points of the year tomorrow." Just getting one lap under his belt would be good, though, wouldn't it?



Button was aware of the competition they faced from the start: “You could see in Q2 that the Red Bulls were very strong in the high-speed corners and we knew then that we would have a fight on our hands. It's going to be interesting to see how the different strategies work out in the race. Of course we would rather be on the front row of the grid but we will give it our best shot in the race tomorrow and see what happens.” Barrichello found it more of a shock, though: “Whilst we were surprised to see that the Red Bulls were quite so fast, it makes for great competition at the front. They will be tough to beat but we believe we have a good strategy. Both Jenson and I know the way to the podium here so let's hope we can repeat that tomorrow.”

Trulli wasn't enjoying himself out there today: “It was a hard qualifying for me and I'm a bit disappointed with the results because after this morning's practice session I believed we had the pace to be at the front. But somehow, just as in Australia, the grip slipped away between this morning and this afternoon.” Glock could argue that his day was worse though: “I couldn't string a lap together and I knew it would be difficult to get into Q3 because the times were so tight. It felt slippery, I couldn't quite feel confident with the car and on the last lap I made a mistake so that was that. With our penalty it means we are starting from the back row so now we just have to hope for rain tomorrow.”

Over at Force India, Fisichella is starting right at the back, but is really looking further ahead: “This race might be tough but we know there is another step to come in Bahrain so the aim here is to get to the finish.” Sutil is slightly more optimistic though: “Although today was tough, we should be more competitive in the race as the pace on Friday over longer runs was better. Our goal now is to finish without any incidents. We know our car is reliable so maybe we can pick up some places like this.”

Massa isn't enjoying his car at the moment: “Not having the KERS is definitely a handicap in my case, especially in qualifying. This is another area where we must work, to go back to using it as soon as possible.” Kimi is realistic about what they achieved today: “Of course I'm not happy with eighth place but, given our current potential, we have to settle for this. We got everything out of the car but we had no more new tyres for Q3 and therefore, it's already something to have put quite a few of our competitors behind us.”

Heidfeld says his quickest lap in Q2 was the best he could possibly have done, but adds: “I missed the top ten qualifying by just one hundredth of a second, but nevertheless it is obvious we have a lack of pace.” Kubica found the lack of the grip on the car really difficult, but admits to making a mistake in turn 12 which cost him a fast lap. For Williams, Rosberg has been eyeing up the competition: “We'll have to see how everyone around us looks in terms of fuel. It would be good if, after Australia and Malaysia, things would go a bit more our way tomorrow. I must say that, for me, today's surprise was Alonso.” Nakajima adds that the car is as competitive as ever, so his 15th place is a little confusing to him and the team. More work required.

As the surprise of the day, Alonso is just happy the effect P2 has on his colleagues: “This afternoon achieving the front row of the grid is a great motivation for the team. It is unbelievable and the first time that I've seen such an incredible effort. The team has been working 24 hours a day for the past few weeks to produce these parts and today it was time to deliver.” Piquet is quick to point the finger though, saying: “Obviously I didn't have the new parts that Fernando had, but it's still disappointing not to make it into Q2 as the car was working well this morning and we had made some improvements overnight.”

Finally, pole sitter Vettel is relieved their gamble of running few laps worked out, although it wasn't entirely their choice: “I'm very, very happy - it's unbelievable. It was a bit last minute! I only had one run in each qualifying session but, as you can see, you don't need more! It wasn't easy, we had a problem with the car and had to run as little as possible.” I figured Webber would be annoyed to have missed out on pole position, but if he is, he covers it well: “What a result! The work that's gone into this from the team, especially over the last few weeks, has been



incredible. It would have been good to have both cars on the front row, but Fernando did a great job. I was expecting to be a little bit tighter in the end, but we'll see how the fuel loads pan out tomorrow. We've done a good job."

Quote of the Day

That's it for this episode. Thanks to everyone who's been joining us in the live comments, it's such a great addition to watching the sessions. Please join us on Sidepodcast.com for commenting if you can, and I'll see you there. For now, I'll leave you with this quote from Fabrice Lom, Track Support Engineer for Renault. He says: "After all the politics that has gone on, now it's about racing and it's great to be in the position we are for tomorrow. We have three Renault engines in the top three, so a great day for Renault."

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YOUR WEEKLY F1 FIX