



F1 Digest 2009 – Monaco Qualifying

Welcome to F1 Digest 2009 – Monaco Qualifying.

A relatively green track after Friday's day of rest means that Free Practice is crucial heading into one of the most important qualifying sessions of the season.

Free Practice 3

A nice bright start to the day saw the track temperature at 33 degrees C and the air at 24. Following engine blowups from Kubica and Vettel yesterday, Massa had to change his Ferrari motor this morning, which meant his start to practice was a little delayed.

However, everyone else was ready to go and dived out onto the track as soon as the lights went green. It was installation laps all round, with Fisichella the first to set a laptime. Trulli posted the early benchmark though, with Glock just behind him. The times were falling gradually, with Hamilton jumping up to the top spot, followed by Alonso.

Massa managed to get out of the garage just ahead of the halfway mark, and by then everyone else had set a laptime as well. Hamilton was on a hot lap and came across a slow moving Kubica. Neither really knew what to do and both ended up going straight across at the Swimming Pool. Hamilton held on to his lead, though, with Rosberg slipping in to split him and Alonso.

With 30 minutes to go, Massa popped up into fourth, whilst Fisichella spun his Force India. He managed to avoid the barriers. Barrichello jumped up to second, and Raikkonen did the same, pushing the Brawn car down a place. Then the Finn went fastest by seven thousandths of a second. Things were getting close out there.

Towards the back, the Toyotas and BMWs were struggling, Heidfeld plum last. Button went fastest and Alonso regained his second position. With just three minutes to go, everyone was out on track, and when the timer hit zero, it was Alonso who took P1. Those who wanted to proceed to do practice starts on the grid, as the pit lane in Monaco is too small to do so.

Results

Alonso was fastest with a 1:15.164, and Button just behind him on a 1:15.233. Kovalainen was next, jumping Hamilton at the last minute, whilst Barrichello was just five tenths off his teammates pace. The Ferraris were next, Massa ahead of Raikkonen, then Hamilton in seventh. Vettel, Rosberg and Webber rounded out the top ten, all within the 1:15 lap times, but 11th placed Nakajima fell to a 1:16.103. Sutil was high up in 12th, followed by Bourdais and Fisichella. Piquet ended the morning in 15th, with Buemi just a tenth behind him. Then Glock, Kubica, Heidfeld and Trulli floundered at the bottom of the timesheets.

Qualifying

With overtaking at a minimum around the streets of Monaco, qualifying is supremely important. The track temperature was up to 45 degrees C, with air at 25. The Toyotas were out first, whilst Massa barely made it round his outlap. He crashed into the barrier, knocking his nose loose, and had to return to the garage without having set a time.

Amazingly, Fisichella set the early benchmark, although he was already on the softer tyre. Then Buemi jumped him, and then Vettel. Massa returned to the track with just over ten minutes to go.



Barrichello was on a hot lap, and the back of his car wobbled, narrowly missing a collision with the barriers. Hamilton was not so lucky, as he lost it on the way into the corner, and his session was over. In fact, the session was red flagged so the marshals could clear the car and the debris. The front suspension was ruined, and a tyre was hanging off.

On the restart, the Ferraris were out first, but everyone soon piled out for their final laps. Trulli pitted in the last few seconds, despite being in the bottom five, and as it turns out, the Toyota and BMW performance from Free Practice continued into qualifying.

The fastest three in this first session were Rosberg, Button and Webber, whilst we lost Hamilton, Heidfeld, Kubica, Trulli and Glock.

The second session began with Nakajima out first. He was followed by many others, but then started going really slowly in the middle of the lap. Seemingly, there was no problem as he carried on regardless. Raikkonen set the first decent time followed by Massa. Vettel then jumped up to P1.

With nine minutes to go, Alonso finally emerged from the pit lane, just as the others were heading in. Piquet grazed the barrier towards the end of his lap, then spun it on the final corner. He avoided the barriers this time but struggled to get the Renault going again. He finally managed to get it out of the way just as Alonso came barrelling round the corner.

Race Control confirmed that Fisichella's times for this second session would be deleted as he had cut the chicane, and this moved him down a couple of places to fifteenth. When he came out to set a time, he remained last. Meanwhile, those at the top decided to sit out the final flurry – Kovalainen, Webber and Rosberg didn't come out again, allowing Raikkonen to jump to the very top.

The fastest three at the end of Q2 were Raikkonen, Kovalainen and Webber, and dropping out Buemi, Piquet, Fisichella, Bourdais and Sutil.

The final ten minute dash to pole saw Vettel out first, but everyone out quickly. Only Webber took his time. At the halfway stage it was Rosberg, Massa, Vettel and Button, but naturally it didn't look as though it was going to stay that way. Raikkonen was the first to give up and return to the pits, whilst Button set the pole time. We eagerly watched the others to see if they could beat it but they could not.

Results

Button takes yet another pole position, with Raikkonen lining up on the grid beside him. Barrichello was a tenth behind his teammate in third, with Vettel fourth. Massa finished fifth and Rosberg sixth, whilst Kovalainen did his best for McLaren in seventh. Webber ended up 8th, whilst Alonso and Nakajima rounded out the top ten.

A recap of those not making the top ten in order – Buemi starts 11th, with Piquet behind him, Fisichella, Bourdais and Sutil all seem slightly elevated above their normal qualifying positions. That's due to Hamilton starting 16th, Heidfeld and Kubica behind, with Trulli in 19th and Glock in 20th.

Fuel Loads

The most important thing we learned from the fuel loads this week is that Vettel was running light, presumably trying to get pole position. He has roughly nine laps less fuel than pole sitter Button, and is starting back in fourth. Not an ideal situation. The Brawn cars have a decent amount of fuel on board, both very similar, making Jenson's lap look even better. Raikkonen is second on the grid and just a little lighter on fuel.



Towards the back, Bourdais, Fisichella, Glock, and Kubica are all fuelled heavy, probably enough to get them to lap 50 and more. Hamilton though, is running light at the back and going aggressive – which is a brave strategy to try in Monaco.

Team by Team

Talking of Hamilton, he takes full responsibility for what happened: “I made a mistake. I just braked too late – it's unfortunate, but these things happen. It's not been a good day: I had been going well all weekend and had the possibility of being on the front row.” Kovalainen starts 7th and felt a bit happier in the cockpit: “The car definitely felt calmer and more stable over the bumps. It's a bit easier to control. I've felt really comfortable with the car throughout the whole weekend. Obviously, we wanted to be on pole but didn't manage that - let's see how the race unfolds and where we'll be after the first stops.”

For Red Bull, Vettel thinks he might have been held up slightly by Nakajima, but traffic is a problem round the street circuit. He said: “On the last half of my lap I was stuck in traffic – when that happens you lose downforce and start to slide, so it's anything but qualifying!” Webber is pondering what rubber to start on: “We knew it was going to be very tight, but we have a reasonable strategy for tomorrow. There are some different ideas going round about what tyres everyone will start the race on, as the hard and soft tyres have different characteristics in race conditions.” As yet undecided, it seems.

Buemi is thinking positive: “I am reasonably happy with my performance, although I could have made it into the top ten if I hadn't made a mistake at the final corner. But there's no point thinking about that anymore. Now we must concentrate on tomorrow, trying to find the best possible strategy.” Bourdais may or may not have some advice for Lewis: “This afternoon, I just could not get the car to turn and I don't know why. I touched the barriers a few times, but there's a big difference between touching and hitting!”

Heidfeld is, let's face it, a bit down in the dumps: “Obviously this is extremely disappointing. We made a lot of changes after Thursday's free practice and even more changes after this morning's session... it was rather a change for the worse than for the better, but it didn't really make a big difference anyway.” Meanwhile Kubica can sum up his weekend in seven words: “So far we have only had difficulties.”

Toyota have had a similar day to BMW and have similar reactions, although Trulli believes he was held up by a Renault: “I was on a pretty good lap at the end of Q1 when I was blocked by another car in the final two corners. That would have been my quickest lap and I would have been easily in Q2. So I am angry about that but ultimately we haven't shown good enough performance this weekend.” Glock simply adds that they have struggled since the very first lap of the weekend.

Force India felt the benefit of the previous two teams struggles though, as Sutil points out: “A very good qualifying for us, with two cars into Q2 for the first time ever. It feels a bit like a pole position for us, and it was fun to be able to do it. Everything came together, the team did a good job in the garage and I felt my lap was strong.” Fisichella echoes these thoughts but is wary, he says: “For tomorrow I want to get to the end of the race and let's see - this is Monaco, you never know what can happen.”

Kimi is quite talkative about his day: “Second place is a nice result but I'm disappointed that I missed out on pole by a few hundredths. Here, there is a much bigger difference between starting from first or second place.” Meanwhile Massa is still feeling positive: “Today's showing confirms we are capable of fighting for the top places. We were in with a chance of getting into the top three, but I never managed to get a clean lap, partly because of traffic and partly through some small slip ups. These things can easily happen in Monaco and fifth is still a good place to start the race.”



For Williams, Rosberg had some undefined balance problems and isn't impressed: "The first two sessions went fine today, but I was not happy with the final conclusion in Q3. P6 was not where I wanted to be and it should have been better." Nakajima, though, has achieved a first today: "It was a good session for me, it is of course the first time I have made it into Q3 this season, so I do want to say thanks to the team for preparing a good car."

Over at Renault, Alonso says he got the most out of the car that he could, so starting in ninth reflects the cars pace. Piquet isn't 100% happy with how his day went, but says: "However, if you had said to me before the weekend that we would have this result, I think I would have been relatively satisfied and starting 12th is not too bad."

Finally, we look to the polesitters Brawn GP. Button says that he was fighting the entire lap and wasn't sure he'd make it, but points out: "It means a lot to me, they all do, but this one is so important for the race tomorrow." Barrichello adds: "Of course I'm sorry that I didn't get pole position but the car has felt really good all weekend and we have a great chance for the race tomorrow."

Quote of the Day

That sums up the days action, now we can look forward to the Grand Prix. If you're anywhere near Sidepodcast.com during the race, why not visit the live comments and discuss what's happening with some lovely people. Anyway, I'll leave you with a quote from Pascal Vasselon of Toyota: "It has been a very difficult weekend, obviously. There is clearly something wrong on the car which we are looking at; we have to fix this."

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