

## BUTTON HOPES FOR RAIN TO CLEAR SINGAPORE HAZE

**SINGAPORE:** For Jenson Button, languishing near the bottom of the Formula One championship standings, the prospect of a tropical storm during Sunday's Singapore Grand Prix would come as a rare and welcome relief.

Like nearly everyone else, the McLaren driver hopes a heavy downpour will clear the dense haze that has blanketed the tiny Southeast Asian state, a result of farmers in neighbouring Indonesia burning forests. Button does not think the smoke presents any particular safety issues, saying the visibility was good enough for drivers while medical helicopters were not needed in Singapore because the hospitals were so close to the track.

But he is worried about the health dangers of breathing in smoke while driving. "It's very difficult walking around in the streets. You can smell the smoke but when you're pushing yourself to the maximum in the car and you're having to take big gulps of air..." he told Reuters on Wednesday, hours after flying in from the Thai resort of Phuket where had been

acclimatising. "That's a big issue but hopefully it's going to clear a little bit because it could be a health issue, from what I've read. "My wife is actually out now buying face masks, which she wears all the time. She's Japanese so she always wears them on the flight... but I'm not sure they'll fit over my crash helmet so that might be a bit of an issue."

Rain has traditionally been unwelcome at the Singapore Grand Prix, which was first held in 2008. But Button, whose team have struggled this season, said he would welcome it because it would enhance his prospects and provide a unique spectacle. "It's crazy driving a Formula One car in the wet, it's crazy in the dry, especially at a circuit like Singapore, so the wet does make it very difficult but I think the fans (watching on TV) love it and even the people that are watching it here," he said.

"They're going to get wet but I think they'll love the experience of watching Formula One cars at night in the rain with brake discs and calipers from the heat and also the flames out of the exhaust. "I

think it'll really add something to it if you have the spray as well. I think it could be a great spectacle. It's going to happen one day here. We're going to have a wet race."

Button says his Formula One future is close to being decided and if he does race on next season it will only be with his beloved McLaren. The 35-year-old, the second oldest driver currently in the sport, is weighing up whether he will go around again next year or end a 16-year career in which he won the 2009 world championship. "We're not there yet," he told Reuters in an interview ahead of this weekend's Singapore Grand Prix.

"It's always a difficult situation when you've had such a long career in Formula One, but also such a long career with a certain team, with McLaren.

"Whichever way it goes it's not an easy decision but hopefully over the next few weeks we can let you know." Button's future has been the source of some speculation after a frustrating season in an uncompetitive Honda-engined car, in which he has finished

just seven of the first 12 races, with a best position of eighth. But Button, who joined McLaren in 2010 and a year after he won the world title with Brawn, said any indecision was not related to the team's performance this season.

"I can't give you too many details but away from who's decision it is, obviously you have to look at where you are in your life," he said. "I've been racing in Formula One for a long time and I've still got a massive love for motor racing and Formula One.

"If I am racing in Formula One next year and in the future I want to be with McLaren. It's a team I've spent so many years with, gone through some great times and bad times as well," added the Briton. "I definitely want to be here but there's just things we need to talk over and make sure we're all on the same page." Some media speculation earlier in the season had linked Button to a return to Williams, where he made his debut in 2000, but that possibility ended when the former world champions announced an unchanged lineup for 2016. —Reuters

## REDS MEET BORDEAUX AS CELTIC TAKE ON AJAX

### EUROPA LEAGUE OPENERS

**PARIS:** As the Europa League group stage gets underway today, AFP Sports picks five of the games to look out for in the opening round of matches:

#### Bordeaux (FRA) v Liverpool (ENG)

Before coming up against Russia's Rubin Kazan and Sion of Switzerland, Liverpool begin their Group B campaign with a tricky trip to France to play Bordeaux. The Reds make the journey on the back of chastening defeats to West Ham United and Manchester United in the Premier League, and manager Brendan Rodgers could do with a much-improved display, especially after performing so poorly in Europe last season.

A year ago, Liverpool finished third in their Champions League group behind Real Madrid and Basel before being eliminated from the Europa League by Besiktas in the round of 32. The English side are without captain Jordan Henderson, who has travelled to the United States to seek advice on a heel injury. Adam Lallana and Daniel Sturridge might feature, however, against a Bordeaux side who are not the force they once were but are fresh from a respectable 2-2 draw at Paris Saint-Germain on Friday. The sides last met in France in the Champions League group stage in 2006/07, when Rafa Benitez's Liverpool won 1-0. However, much has changed since then and in the spring Bordeaux moved into a new 42,000-seat stadium that will host games at Euro 2016.

#### Tottenham Hotspur (ENG) v Qarabag (AZE)

The other English side in the group stage, Tottenham Hotspur, face what on paper looks like their easiest tie at home to Qarabag of Azerbaijan before also taking on Anderlecht and Monaco in Group J. Spurs boss Mauricio Pochettino is likely to heavily rotate his squad for the game but might be tempted to hand a start to Harry Kane, who has yet to score in the Premier League this season but netted seven times in the Europa League last season. The champions of Azerbaijan, Qarabag have already visited the British Isles this season in Champions League qualifying, losing to Celtic.

#### Ajax (NED) v Celtic (SCO)

Celtic may not have qualified for the Champions League group stage, but the draw

for the Europa League handed them some glamour ties to look forward to in Group A, starting away to Ajax.

"Last year we progressed in the Europa League to play Inter Milan in the knockout stages, and the group this year is a Champions League group in all but name," Celtic manager Ronny Deila told the club's website. "We know it's going to be difficult but we've got the players here to definitely believe we can get through."

Like Celtic, Ajax-coached by former Rangers player Frank de Boer-were eliminated in qualifying for the Champions League but they are unbeaten domestically and sit top of the Dutch Eredivisie. These sides met in the Champions League group stage two years ago, with Ajax winning 1-0 at the Amsterdam Arena. Fenerbahce and Norwegian champions Molde complete Group A and Ajax's Nick Viergever believes the meeting with the Hoops could prove decisive. "We need to win against Celtic because Fenerbahce are the favorites. They have spent a lot of money on their squad recently so that means realistically there is probably only one other place," he was quoted as saying by the Daily Record.

#### Borussia Dortmund (GER) v FC Krasnodar (RUS)

Bayern Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said this week that Borussia Dortmund "belong" in the Champions League but Thomas Tuchel's side are in the Europa League this season. They begin their Group C campaign at home to Russian side FC Krasnodar and will be bidding to continue their fine start to the season. Dortmund have won every game so far, including beating Austria's Wolfsberger and Odd of Norway in Europa League qualifying and recording four wins out of four in the Bundesliga.

#### Fiorentina (ITA) v Basel (SUI)

Basel failed to qualify for the Champions League group stage so the Swiss champions can instead focus on trying to reach the final of the Europa League, which will be played in their own stadium, St Jakob-Park. Their opening game in Group I is away to Fiorentina in Italy, which means a reunion with Paulo Sousa. The Portuguese coached Basel to the Swiss title before leaving for Florence in the summer. — AFP



Lewis Hamilton takes a curve in this file photo.

## HAMILTON LOOMS LARGE IN SMOKY SINGAPORE

**SINGAPORE:** Lewis Hamilton may have to fight through choking smog on his way to a third world title as the Singapore Grand Prix battles thick smoke from Southeast Asian forest fires.

The Briton enjoys a strong lead in the Formula One standings and would miss out on a chance to draw further ahead if organisers take the extreme, and so far unlikely, action of cancelling Sunday's race.

But visibility could be a serious concern at the night grand prix, held under floodlights on a narrow and bumpy street circuit which snakes past the iconic landmarks of downtown Singapore.

The sight of fans in surgical face masks, and fog shrouding Singapore's glitzy skyline, would also be far from ideal for the wealthy city-state in front of a global TV audience.

Organisers stressed there were no plans to change the race programme but warned in a statement: "The haze situation is highly changeable not only from day to day, but from hour to hour. "Therefore, it is currently not possible to reliably predict what the PSI (pollutant standards index) level might be over the race weekend." PSI levels will be shown on the circuit's big

screens and surgical face masks will be sold at cost price, while medical posts will be on standby for breathing and eye problems.

Hamilton tweeted a picture of himself smiling as he arrived, but it has not been a happy week for Singapore's 5.4 million residents as pollution soared to unhealthy levels accompanied by the acrid smell of wood smoke.

In just one of many activities affected by the annual haze problem, a race simulator event involving McLaren's Jenson Button on Wednesday was moved indoors "due to the current hazy conditions", organisers said.

With downpours arriving on Tuesday and Wednesday and more storms forecast, rain may help improve the air quality-but it would also provide an extra obstacle if it strikes during qualifying or the race. Despite the unpredictable conditions, Mercedes driver Hamilton will be expected to get down to business quickly at the circuit where he won last season en route to a narrow world title win.

After seven victories in 12 races this year, the Briton is 53 points clear of team-mate Nico Rosberg and stands on the verge of emulating his idol Ayrton Senna with three F1 champi-

onships. Hamilton can also equal the late Brazilian's record for consecutive pole positions (eight) and his career haul of race wins (41) if he triumphs at the Marina Bay Street Circuit.

"Since I was a boy I have always wanted to emulate Ayrton and be as similar to him as I could-while still being myself," Hamilton told Sky Sports. "I've always wanted to drive a car like he could or handle a car like he could.

"It's quite surreal to think that 20 years later I am fighting for a similar number of podiums or championships, but we have to remember that if he continued he would have won many more. But I feel proud to be in terms of results similar to such a great."

Rosberg will try to launch a late surge after he flamed out at the last grand prix in Italy, but he will be wary of Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel, who is 21 points behind him in third place.

"I was only a few thousandths off pole last year and feeling good for the race until a problem with the steering wheel ended my weekend," Rosberg said. "I know I've got the pace to win there, so I'm hoping for a clean weekend and a chance to unleash this silver beast under the lights." — AFP



**FRANCE:** Liverpool's players take part in a training session at the Matmut Atlantique stadium in Bordeaux on the eve of the UEFA Europa League Group B Bordeaux vs Liverpool football match. — AFP

## RONALDO STILL HAS HIS SCORING TOUCH

**MADRID:** Next time, wait a little longer before wondering whether Cristiano Ronaldo has lost his scoring touch. It turns out the Real Madrid striker is just fine. After an unusually barren start to his season, Ronaldo came alive in the last two games, scoring eight goals.

He netted five in a 6-0 rout of Espanyol in the Spanish league on Saturday, and three more in a 4-0 victory against Shakhtar Donetsk in the Champions League on Tuesday. It was enough to make him Real Madrid's all-time leading scorer in the Liga, and move him ahead of Lionel Messi as the top scorer in the European tournament. "I feel very proud and happy with this moment," Ronaldo said after his latest impressive performance.

Ronaldo was yet to score this season at club or international level, and was showing signs of frustration. He had innumerable chances in Madrid's first two games in the Spanish league, many of them easy ones by his standards. It was clear he was getting upset after every miss, although he denied the scoring drought was ever a concern. "My goal is at the end of the season, winning titles for the team, such as the Champions League or La Liga," Ronaldo said. He scored his 33rd hat trick with Real Madrid on Tuesday, and third for the

club in the Champions league. The Portuguese forward entered the match at the Santiago Bernabeu level with Messi as the Champions League leading scorers with 77 each. The Argentine playmaker had a chance to match Ronaldo when Barcelona played Roma in Italy late yesterday. "I'm very happy with the goals and the records," Ronaldo said. "I get a sense of pride from being in this position, but I have to mention the team, because the team has helped me so much."

His teammates have been the ones praising him recently. "He simply never gets tired of scoring," defender Nacho Fernandez said. "We know how important he is for the team."

Coach Rafa Benitez said he was not surprised by Ronaldo's impressive run. "I know Cristiano Ronaldo's value and performance level," he said. "He is the best in the world, and is showing that in games and every training session." Thanks in great part to Ronaldo, Real Madrid has outscored its opponents 15-0 in its first four games, three in the Spanish league, and the one in the Champions. But the defense has been just as great. It is the first time in Madrid's 113-year history that it has kept a clean sheet in its first four games of the season. —AP

## SHAW INJURY PUTS UNITED'S VAN GAAL ON THE DEFENSIVE

**LONDON:** Manchester United fans were already concerned about their side's lack of goalscorers but Luke Shaw's horrific leg break, and likely six month absence now has them worrying about the defence as well. The England left back suffered a double fracture of his right leg in Tuesday's 2-1 Champions League defeat at PSV Eindhoven after a scything tackle in the penalty area by Mexican Hector Moreno. The game was stopped for eight minutes while medical staff attended to Shaw, who was carried off on a stretcher with an oxygen mask strapped to his face.

United said in an update on Wednesday that Shaw had surgery immediately after the match at the St. Anna Hospital in Geldrop and would remain in Eindhoven to continue his recovery.

His team mates returned home late yesterday. Moreno, who broke his leg playing for Mexico against United manager Louis van Gaal's Netherlands at the 2014 World Cup and sent a message of support to Shaw via Twitter, went unpunished.

"It is very bad and sad for him, but also for our team," said Van Gaal, who replaced Shaw with Argentine Marcos Rojo. "I'm not a doctor so I cannot say but when you have a double fracture it is four to six months... I hope he will play again this season."

Shaw had been in top form for club and country after a difficult first year at Old Trafford following his 30 million pounds (\$46.27 million) plus move from Southampton. He had started all of United's eight games as well as playing in the Euro 2016 qualifiers against San Marino and Switzerland, with England manager Roy Hodgson seeing him as a stalwart in the same fashion as Ashley Cole.

His prolonged absence will be a blow for Hodgson, even if England's place at next year's finals in France is already secure, as it will for Van Gaal who had spoken last month of how important the player would be in his lineup.

#### BIG TALENT

"Luke is a big talent," the Dutchman, whose side can no longer count on a dominant Rio Ferdinand or Nemanja Vidic-like figure in the heart of the defence, had declared. "I think this shall be the season of Luke Shaw-that I believe." Shaw had worked hard on his fit-



**EINDHOVEN:** Manchester United's Luke Shaw right foot is twisted in a weird position after a tackle by PSV's Hector Moreno, resulting in a double fracture of Shaw's right leg, during the Champions League Group B soccer match. — AP

ness, paying for a personal trainer to accompany him on holiday in Dubai, and had given United pace down the flank. With Daley Blind and Chris Smalling in the centre and Matteo Darmian on the right, United have looked solid in defence with fans more focused on where the goals might come from after the exit of Robin van Persie, Javier Hernandez and Radamel Falcao. Apart from Premier League leaders and local rivals Manchester City, who have kept clean sheets in winning their five domestic matches so far, United currently boast the second best defensive record in the top tier along with Arsenal.

Despite that record, there has been concern that the lack of defensive reinforcements in the last transfer window has left United vulnerable to injury.

"He (Shaw) has played so well and been an integral part of this decent start by Manchester United because the back four has been settled," former Liverpool defender Phil Thompson told Sky Sports television yesterday. Van Gaal will have to change that, with Rojo-who plays left back for Argentina-brought on in a central role at PSV while Blind moved to the left back position instead. Thompson, for one, was not convinced by the changes which led to both of PSV's goals. The first came after a deflection off Blind, the second when Luciano Narsingh was left unmarked by Rojo to head home. "Blind and Smalling have been very good," said Thompson. "Why did he move Blind to left back and Rojo to centre back when that has been your rock?" — Reuters