

Sports

Pass master Ricciardo celebrates surprise Chinese GP victory

Vettel finished eighth, lead trimmed to nine points

SHANGHAI: Daniel Ricciardo made a string of thrilling overtaking moves to snatch a surprise Chinese Grand Prix victory yesterday after a safety car strategy gamble by his Red Bull team paid off handsomely.

The Australian, who started sixth after almost missing qualifying, made the most of fresher tyres to finish 8.8 seconds ahead of Valtteri Bottas in a Mercedes.

"I don't seem to win boring races," he grinned from the podium, before chugging the champagne from his racing boot in a trademark 'shoey'.

"They are all pretty fun but that was unexpected."

Kimi Raikkonen took third place for Ferrari but title contenders Lewis Hamilton and Sebastian Vettel both endured trying afternoons, the four times world champions ending up fourth and eighth respectively.

"I was in no-man's land today," said Hamilton. "I had no pace." Vettel, who won the first two races of the season for Ferrari, saw his lead over Hamilton slashed from 17 points to nine.

The German's race unravelled spectacularly, a collision with Red Bull's Max Verstappen dropping him down the order, after the pre-race favourite had initially made a good start from pole and held the early lead.

Verstappen had a 10 seconds penalty applied post-race for causing the collision, dropping the Dutch youngster from fourth to fifth.

Vettel was also passed by the McLaren of Fernando Alonso two laps from the end.

MINOR MIRACLE

Ricciardo's mechanics had performed a minor miracle to change a blown engine after practice on

Saturday, getting him out just in time during the first phase of qualifying. "Putting ourselves 24 hours ago, I thought we might be starting at the back of the grid," said the Australian. "Today is the real reward for that work."

Yesterday's win was Ricciardo's first since a chaotic Azerbaijan Grand Prix last June and it also broke Mercedes' Shanghai stranglehold, with the champions having won the last six races there.

Mercedes are yet to win this year, the first time since the turbo hybrid era started in 2014 that they have been beaten for three races in a row.

Ricciardo and Verstappen were not early contenders but the deployment of the safety car on the 32nd of 56 laps, after the Toro Rosso pair Pierre Gasly and Brendon Hartley collided and left debris on track, swung the race Red Bull's way.

Bottas was in the lead at that stage ahead of Vettel, having overhauled the German during the pitstops, while Verstappen was fourth and Ricciardo sixth.

Red Bull pulled both their cars into the pits, 'double-stacking' them and bolting a set of fresh soft tyres on each. The advantage of fresh tyres allowed Verstappen and Ricciardo to seythe through the field. "The safety car was so unlucky for us," exclaimed Bottas over the radio.

Verstappen botched his chances of victory, and a possible one-two for Red Bull, with scrappy attempts to overtake the main title contenders.

The Dutchman ran wide and dropped back behind Ricciardo when trying to pass Hamilton and later spun his Red Bull and Vettel's Ferrari while attempting to pass the German for third-an error he owned



SHANGHAI: Red Bull's Australian driver Daniel Ricciardo celebrates on the podium after winning the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai yesterday. — AFP

up to afterwards.

Renault's Nico Hulkenberg finished sixth for Renault, ahead of Alonso whose aggressive overtaking move on

Vettel was 'noted' by stewards. Spaniard Carlos Sainz was ninth for Renault with Kevin Magnussen rounding out the top 10 for Haas. — Reuters

Ashton breaks try record as hobbling Toulon stun Montpellier

PARIS: Toulon's English international winger Chris Ashton set a Top 14 record on Saturday when he scored his 22nd try of the season as the three-time European champions stunned leaders Montpellier 32-17.

The 31-year-old Ashton touched down in the seventh minute in Marseille after a pass from former All Black centre Ma'a Nonu, completing a move started by Facundo Isa and Semi Radradra. For the last three weeks, Ashton, who left Saracens for France last summer, had been tied with Fijian Napolioni Nalaga, who scored 21 tries for Clermont in 2008-09.

Toulon scored all of their four tries in the first half with Radradra, skipper Mathieu Bastareaud and Isa adding to Ashton's opener. Montpellier would have wrapped up a semi-final place with victory but Vern Cotter's side had to settle for a second-half rally with Gabriel Ngandebé and Kelian Galletier adding to centre Vincent Martin's 34th-minute score. Toulon, coached by former Montpellier boss Fabien Galthie, stayed comfortably on course for the play-offs with just two matches left in the regular season.

Victory came at a cost, however, with influential fly-half Francois Trinh-Duc forced off after just 11 minutes with a shoulder injury after being crunched by Montpellier prop Davit Kubriashvili who earned a yellow card for his troubles. French international skipper Guilhem Guirado was then left the field after just 20 minutes with knee ligament damage.

"We had the game won but we're disappointed that we didn't get the bonus point," said Galthie whose team are in third place. "That might be important with still two more games to play." Cotter, trying to guide Montpellier to a first ever Top 14 title, took comfort



MARSEILLE: RC Toulon's British winger Chris Ashton (L) scores a try despite Montpellier's French winger Gabriel Ngandebé during the French Top 14 rugby union match RC Toulon vs Montpellier on Saturday at the Velodrome stadium in Marseille, southern France. — AFP

from his team's second-half recovery after trailing 29-7 at the interval.

"We showed a lot of character to get back into the match," said the New Zealander who is familiar with Top 14 success having led Clermont to the title in 2010 during an eight-year spell in charge. "We learnt a lot about ourselves after not starting very well, conceding two early tries and having a player yellow-carded."

'PATHETIC' PAU

Pau's play-off hopes suffered a setback when they slumped to a 33-22 home loss to Agen for whom Filipo Nakosi grabbed a hat-trick of tries. "Nothing worked tonight. I didn't recognise us at all—we were pathetic," fumed Pau coach Simon Mannix.

Pau dropped to sixth spot—the last play-off place—after Lyon thumped Stade Français 44-3. Lyon ran in six tries for the bonus-point victory while Stade stay

third from bottom, still not safe from relegation with just two games to play. Lyon's celebrations were tempered, however, when their international fly-half Baptiste Couilloud suffered what appeared to be a serious injury after a late tackle from Stade lock Alexandre Flanquart early in the second half.

Defending champions Clermont, who have no hope of making the play-offs and were knocked out of the European Cup quarter-finals by Racing 92 last month, saved a little face with a 33-3 win over Bordeaux-Begles. Clermont scored three tries, all in the second half and all from forwards — John Ulugia, Loni Uhila and Jacobus Van Tonder. Oyonnax downed Brive 40-17 in a dogfight between the Top 14's bottom two sides.

Yesterday, second-placed Racing can close the gap on leaders Montpellier when they travel to fourth-placed Toulouse. La Rochelle, who started the week in sixth, host Castres. — AFP

Rosales beats Higa to claim WBC belt

TOKYO: Cristofer Rosales of Nicaragua yesterday secured the WBC flyweight belt by beating Japan's Daigo Higa, who the previous day had given up his title for failing to make the weight. Rosales began his aggressive assault early on, showering the former champion with a barrage of uppercuts followed by body blows, and Higa noticeably slowed down from the sixth round. Rosales opened the ninth round by firing a succession of heavy left body blows, while Higa's punches only connected with the air. The Japanese side asked for the bout to be stopped one minute and 14 seconds into the ninth round.

The defeat was an extra shock for Higa, who the previous day became the first Japanese champion to be stripped of a title because of a weight issue. The 22-year-old, who had 15 straight knock-out victories, weighed in at 51.7 kilogrammes (114 pounds) on the eve of the bout, exceeding the flyweight limit by 900 grammes (32 ounces).

However the WBC and both sides agreed to go ahead with yesterday's bout on condition that Rosales would take the belt with a win, with the title to be vacated in the case of a draw or a Higa victory. Japan's Kyodo News reported. Higa burst onto the boxing scene in 2014 when he knocked out Thailand's Saengkeng Saknarong in less than a minute. He clinched the vacant WBC flyweight world championship in May. In February he defeated Mexico's Moises Fuentes in his second title defence, his 15th consecutive victory by knockout. — AFP

Henderson holds nerve to claim Hawaii win

LOS ANGELES: Canada's Brooke Henderson held her nerve to clinch the LPGA Tour Lotte Championship in Hawaii on Saturday, firing a three-under-par 69 to seal a four-shot victory.

Henderson had stumbled badly in Friday's third round, dropping three shots in the closing three holes to leave the chasing pack just one shot behind on the par-72 layout at Ko Olina Golf Club, Oahu.

But the 20-year-old from Ontario shrugged off her third-round jitters to remain ahead of the field on Saturday, stretching her lead with two birdies on the front nine to make the turn at two under, 10 under for the tournament. There was a brief wobble with a bogey on the par-three 12th but Henderson hit back with a birdie on the 14th followed by a birdie on the par-three 16th — where she made a double-bogey 24 hours earlier-to close

out her win with a 12-under-par aggregate 276.

It was the sixth LPGA Tour win of the Canadian youngster's career, which includes a victory as a teenager at the Women's PGA Championship in 2016. Henderson finished four shots ahead of Spain's Azahara Munoz, who had thrust herself into contention with a five-under-par final round 67, playing flawlessly to move up the leaderboard having started the day six strokes off the pace.

The 30-year-old from Malaga began slowly with four straight pars, but grabbed her first birdie of the day on the par-five fifth hole. A further birdie at the ninth took her to five under at the turn. However the charge began on the back nine, with consecutive birdies at the 11th and 12th before a further birdie on the 14th. But the Spaniard was unable to add to her birdie spree in the closing holes, leaving her in the clubhouse waiting to see if Henderson would falter. China's Feng Shanshan, Thailand's Ariya Jutanugarn and South Korea's Park In-bee were tied for third on seven under.

American Mo Martin, who had started the final round one off the pace, saw her challenge evaporate with a nightmare six-over-par 78. The 35-year-old 2014 British Open winner from Pasadena, California, carded four bogeys and a double-bogey as her quest for a first career LPGA win in the United States continued. — AFP



KAPOLEI: Brooke Henderson of Canada poses with the trophy after a four shot victory after the fourth round of the LPGA LOTTE Championship at the Ko Olina Golf Club on Saturday in Kapolei, Hawaii. — AFP