

## Sports

# Sebastian Vettel fired up to return Ferrari to the top

## Italian team have a new look heading into the season

**MELBOURNE:** Four-time world champion Sebastian Vettel yesterday vowed to shrug off a “disaster” 2018 and topple arch-rival Lewis Hamilton, with his refreshed team passionate about returning Ferrari to the top.

The German won the opening race of the season in Melbourne last year and backed it up with victory at the next in Bahrain. But Hamilton roared back to sweep 11 of the remaining 19 Grand Prix and the 31-year-old is desperate to turn the tables.

“There is a lot of passion inside this team willing to get out and to express ourselves through winning I think is the best we can do,” he said. “So that’s the target. So far the atmosphere is good, the spirit is right within the team and we will try to carry that into the season.”

Vettel is a winner and having to settle for second in the drivers and constructors championship last year was tough to take. He said it was normal for Ferrari fans to consider finishing runner-up a “disaster”.

“You know the winner takes it all. Lewis has been in that position the last couple of years and we will try to turn it around,” he said. “In the end we are racing for Ferrari and we will try to get

Ferrari back to where we’ve been trying to get it back to for the past few years.” Ferrari haven’t won the constructors’ title since 2008 and their last drivers’ crown came in 2007 through Kimi Raikkonen.

The Italian team have a new look heading into the season, with tech chief Mattia Binotto replacing Maurizio Arrivabene as team principal and young gun Charles Leclerc in for the experienced Raikkonen. Asked if Ferrari were in a better situation now than 12 months ago, the 31-year-old replied: “Yeah quite frankly because last year’s winter testing didn’t go well for us.

“We had some issues with the car to fix. We got a bit lucky during the race weekend (in Melbourne) with the safety car to grab the win. “In this regard we are more prepared. Our car seems to work fine, there are no problems at this stage.”

But he added: “It’s a tough weekend ahead of us.” Despite his huge experience, Vettel admitted to being “a bit nervous” ahead of the 2019 campaign. “You don’t know exactly where you are, you don’t know what’s going to happen,” he said. “At this point we are all hunters and we are all the hunted. We have zero points.” —AFP



**MELBOURNE:** Williams’ Polish driver Robert Kubica (R) and Ferrari’s German driver Sebastian Vettel attend a press conference in Melbourne yesterday, ahead of the Formula One Australian Grand Prix. —AFP

## F1 mourns sudden death of race director Whiting

**MELBOURNE:** The death of Formula One race director Charlie Whiting, a popular and key figure in the sport, cast a pall over the paddock yesterday, three days before the season-opening Australian Grand Prix.

The governing International Automobile Federation (FIA) said in a statement that the Briton, who started his career working for the Hesketh team in 1977, had died in Melbourne of a pulmonary embolism. He was 66.

Australian Michael Masi, a previous deputy race director of the local V8 Supercars series who has served as a steward at Formula One and Formula E, will replace Whiting for the Melbourne weekend. “It is with immense sadness that I learned of Charlie’s sudden passing,” said Jean Todt, president of the International Automobile Federation.

“He has been a great race director, a central and inimitable figure in Formula One who embodied the ethics and spirit of this fantastic sport. Formula One has lost a faithful friend and a charismatic ambassador in Charlie.” Whiting, who had been race director since 1997, started out with defunct British outfit Hesketh before crossing to Brabham to work with the sport’s former commercial supremo Bernie Ecclestone in the 1980s.

A poacher turned gamekeeper, with a ready grin and self-deprecating sense of humour, he joined the FIA as a technical delegate in 1988. Inside the paddock, he was known simply as Charlie—the go-to man for teams, drivers and media.

At the FIA, Whiting was a driving force in pushing improved safety and played a key role in the introduction of the halo, the ring-like barrier fitted over the drivers’ heads to protect them from heavy impacts and missiles. The news was met with shock in the Formula One paddock.



**Charlie Whiting**

“What he did for this sport, I mean, his commitment...he really was a pillar,” five times world champion Lewis Hamilton told reporters.

“I spoke to him yesterday and walked the track for the first couple of corners together with him,” added Ferrari’s Sebastian Vettel. “Difficult to grasp when somebody is just not there anymore. “He’s sort of been our man, the driver’s man. Obviously there are regulations and all that and then there is us and he was the middleman. He was someone you could ask anything of, anytime.”

Former champions McLaren said Whiting would be remembered “as one of the giants of our sport, as well as a great colleague.” Ross Brawn, F1 managing director, said he was “devastated” to lose a friend and colleague.

“I have known Charlie for all of my racing life. We worked as mechanics together, became friends and spent so much time together at race tracks across the world,” the former championship-winning boss of Brawn GP said in a statement. “I was filled with immense sadness when I heard the tragic news.” —Reuters

## Hamilton says Mercedes have work cut in Melbourne

**MELBOURNE:** Mercedes have plenty of work ahead to challenge Ferrari, world champion Lewis Hamilton said yesterday but voiced confidence his team was making good progress. The 34-year-old, who was dominant in 2018, said after pre-season testing in Barcelona the Italian team could be up to half a second quicker at the opening race of the year in Melbourne on Sunday.

While cars have different engine settings and fuel loads in testing, the Briton insisted he wasn’t joking despite winning five drivers’ and constructors’ titles in a row. “Usually the first few races is when you really start to get an idea of where everyone stands,” the five-time champion said in his pre-race press conference.

“But we certainly have work to do. We weren’t talking BS you know (in Barcelona). We have work to do.” Hamilton won 11 of the 21 races in 2018 to beat Ferrari’s Sebastian Vettel and secure his fifth championship with two rounds to spare.

Now fully refreshed after an off-season break spent skydiving and surfing, among other things, he is partnered for a third successive season by Valtteri Bottas. Mercedes is one of only two teams to stick with the same driver line-up and Hamilton said, for him, it was important to have continuity. “On the driving front, continuity is what works. We have a great pairing and the contribution from Valtteri and I has worked well for years,” he said. “We have so many incredible people in the team and the energy is really, really inspiring to see. The communication is better than ever.

“It’s so impressive to see so many people passionate about their jobs and about racing and wanting to do a better job and wanting to improve,” he added. “It’s really cool to see and really encouraging. This is a team that will give absolutely everything to make sure we continue to progress.” —AFP