

Sports

Hamilton can land KO blow at typhoon-threatened Japanese GP

Sebastian Vettel is all but out of the hunt with 128 points behind Hamilton

TOKYO: Lewis Hamilton may not be able to clinch a sixth world championship at the typhoon-threatened Japanese Grand Prix this weekend, but knows he can knock all but teammate Valtteri Bottas out of the title race.

There are only 104 points to be won after Japan and a victory for Hamilton to follow his triumph in Russia will leave only Finland's Bottas able to pass the Englishman. However, a wild weekend of weather is promised at Suzuka which could mean disrupted practice, chaotic qualifying and a wet race punctuated by safety cars.

Japan's weather bureau said yesterday that Super Typhoon Hagibis was projected to hit Tokyo, some 300 kilometres (185 miles) east of Suzuka, on Saturday. "The Honshu main islands will see heavy rains from as early as Friday, and the peak of the bad weather will be on Saturday and Sunday," Japan Meteorological Agency official Yoshinori Muira told AFP.

French driver Jules Bianchi crashed in the 2014 Japanese Grand Prix after a typhoon brought wet conditions and reduced visibility to the Suzuka circuit.

He died of his injuries the following year, becoming the first and only driver killed as a result of a Formula One racing accident since 1994.

FERRARI RESURGENT

Ferrari's resurgence since the summer break rattled Mercedes and Hamilton as the Italian marque sped to a hat-trick of grands prix wins. But the Maranello outfit's failure to turn Charles Leclerc's pole position into another win at Sochi gave Mercedes a surprise one-two.

It also handed Hamilton a 107-point advantage over

the Monegasque with Red Bull's Max Verstappen a further three adrift. Sebastian Vettel is all but out of the hunt, 128 points behind the Englishman.

Hamilton knows a solid result will put him in pole position to wrap up the title in Mexico on October 27, but he insists he is not yet dreaming of his sixth title — a total matched only by Michael Schumacher.

"I just don't try to think about it," Hamilton said after winning in Russia, aware of Ferrari's performance edge. "It's getting harder and harder as the season goes on. Of course the races are counting down but we are just trying to take things one race at a time, put one foot in front of the other and not stumble."

'SUZUKA IS INCREDIBLE'

Rain or shine, Suzuka has the ingredients to be a classic — a rejuvenated Red Bull team pressing the top two, plus a circuit renowned for exciting racing with sweeping bends and dramatic elevation changes.

"It's going to be awesome," said Hamilton of the race which will draw fans in huge number despite being staged during a Rugby World Cup which has captivated Japan.

"Suzuka is incredible, it's one of the most exciting parts of the year and now so more than ever before because you've got three solid, incredibly fast teams pushing each other."

Leclerc was denied a potential third win of his rookie season in Russia because of the team's botched tactics but sees Japan as another great chance. "We've been quick in Singapore, we've been quick in Monza and both of them are the complete opposites so there are no reasons for us to be slow in Japan. But it doesn't mean that we will have an



SOCHI: File photo shows winner Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton celebrates on podium after the Formula One Russian Grand Prix at The Sochi Autodrom Circuit in Sochi on September 29, 2019. —AFP

easy life," said Leclerc.

"I've only been to Suzuka once but it's a track I loved. It was just a really great experience, so I'm really looking forward to going back." The Silver Arrows'

unexpected one-two in Sochi means Mercedes can seal a record-equalling sixth successive constructors' championship this weekend if they manage to increase their lead over Ferrari by 14 points or more. —AFP

Benn denies being refused licence to fight again at 55

LONDON: Former world boxing champion Nigel Benn has denied being turned down for a licence to make a comeback at the age of 55 and said yesterday he welcomed further medical tests to prove his fitness to fight.

The Briton, who last fought in 1996, is coming out of retirement for a Nov. 23 fight in Birmingham against

Cameroon-born Australian Sakio Bika, a 40-year-old ex-world champion.

The former WBC super-middleweight champion confirmed he had made a formal application to the British & Irish Boxing Association (BIBA) for a licence. "I refute the claims that I re-applied for a licence with any other accredited sanctioning body (as has been stated in the press)," he said in a statement. "Therefore, I have not been refused a licence as alleged."

The Daily Telegraph newspaper quoted British Boxing Board of Control (BBBofC) general secretary Robert Smith last month as saying Benn had asked them about a licence. "He was told that we would not consider it, given his age and how long he has been away from the sport. We will not be licensing this event,

it will not be under our jurisdiction," he said then.

Benn acknowledged the risks and need to satisfy medical experts, but said also that he felt discriminated against because of his age. "I've welcomed the requirements of BIBA to clearly establish that I am 'fit to box'," he said. "I have undergone numerous and regular medical investigations to confirm this, including periodic MRI brain scans."

Benn said he would have further tests in the next few weeks, including another brain scan, "to provide clear clarification of my state of health" and there would be extra safety measures at the fight.

He has said he wants to fight again for 'closure', and personal peace of mind, rather than any financial reasons. —Reuters

Mercedes can seal sixth successive title at Suzuka

SUZUKA: Mercedes have their first chance to seal a record-equalling sixth successive Formula One constructors' championship in Japan on Sunday, at a track where they have won for five years in a row.

Despite their domination since the start of the V6 turbo era in 2014, Mercedes and Lewis Hamilton — winner of four of the last five Japanese Grands Prix — are still wary of tempting fate.

A team preview of the race at Suzuka steered well clear of any title talk. "We'll bring some minor upgrades

to the car in Japan which will hopefully help us take a step in the right direction," said team boss Toto Wolff.

"However, we know that we need to extract absolutely everything from our car and the tyres if we want to be able to challenge for a win. We have a strong track record there... but we expect this year to be challenging given the strength of our opponents," added the Austrian.

Mercedes are 162 points clear of Ferrari, who racked up a record six titles in a row between 1999-2004 and are the only ones who can stop the runaway leaders with five races remaining. Third-placed Red Bull are 260 points behind Mercedes with a maximum 220 points still to be won.

To clinch the title at Suzuka, Mercedes need to score 14 more points than Ferrari. Hamilton, 73 points clear of Finnish team mate Valtteri Bottas, will have to wait until at least Mexico two weeks later to

complete an unprecedented title double for the team with his sixth drivers' championship.

Another Japanese Grand Prix victory would equal retired Ferrari great Michael Schumacher's record of six. Mercedes have won 11 of the season's 16 races, eight in one-two formation and with the most recent — Hamilton's ninth of the campaign — coming in Russia.

Despite their strength on paper, Mercedes are feeling the heat from Ferrari. Monegasque Charles Leclerc has started the last four races from pole position and he and German team mate Sebastian Vettel, a four-time winner at Suzuka, converted three of those into successive wins.

But for a virtual safety car interlude, triggered ironically by Vettel stopping just off the track, Ferrari could have celebrated four wins in a row after Sochi. The technical, fast sweeps of the 5.8-km Suzuka track should give the

Italian team another chance to confirm their resurgence. "We know that in order to be at the front in Japan, every aspect of our work must be perfect," said Ferrari team principal Mattia Binotto, who has had to manage tensions between his drivers after Russia. "If we can do that, then we hope to be able to be as competitive as we have been in recent races." Honda, who power the two Red Bull teams, could also be set for their happiest homecoming since they returned to Formula One as an engine supplier in 2015.

Red Bull have two wins this year with Max Verstappen and local fans will be able to cheer reigning Japanese Super Formula champion Naoki Yamamoto when he drives a Toro Rosso in Friday's opening practice. Rain could upset all predictions, though, with Typhoon Hagibis making its way toward Japan. The storm is forecast to strike the Tokyo area, about 400km north of Suzuka, on the weekend. —Reuters

Gulf Bank 642 Marathon registration open

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank launches 'Gulf Bank 642 Marathon' for the fifth consecutive year in partnership with Pro-Vision Sports Management.

The much-anticipated community event invites challenge-seeking athletes as well as beginners to participate in the race on November 16, 2019. Last year's marathon was an unprecedented success with over 7,500 attendees representing over 66 nationalities competing at the event.

Commenting on the annual event, Tony Daher, CEO at Gulf Bank, said: "It is a privilege to see what the Gulf Bank 642 Marathon continues to accomplish year after year, and to witness just how much joy this annual event brings to the public. At Gulf Bank, we are always working to support and empower Kuwaiti youth and local entrepreneurs, and we are proud to continue our CSR programs and initiatives that benefit the Kuwaiti community. Today, we are delighted to renew our strategic partnership with Pro-Vision Sports Management, whose support and commitment are key to the success of the event. We invite everyone to participate in this day of family fun and look forward to welcoming participants from all over the world."

Ahmed Al Huzami, CEO of Pro-Vision Sport Management, said: "We are proud to extend our partnership with Gulf Bank for the fifth year in a row. The Gulf Bank 642 Marathon is no longer just a local sporting activity, having placed Kuwait on the map for international sporting events, and



receiving accreditation from the Association of International Marathons and Distance Races (AIMS) and the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF Athletics). We are delighted to be continuing on this journey with Gulf

Bank and look forward to this year's event."

For event registration and more information regarding participation as a corporate or in groups, please visit www.gulfbank642marathon.com or access the Instagram account @GulfBank642.

'Old sports' must adapt, says surf chief ahead of Olympics debut

MIYAZAKI: As "cool" sports such as surfing, skateboarding and climbing prepare to make their Olympic debut in Tokyo, the president of surfing's governing body has told Reuters that more traditional sports must adapt or face being dropped from the Games. Karate will also make its debut in 2020 while baseball and softball return to the program after a 12-year absence. The additions are part of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) bid to reach a younger audience and International Surfing Association (ISA) President Fernando Aguerre said the impact of the changes could not be overstated.

"The IOC, and I think the world, wanted youth," Aguerre told Reuters at last month's ISA World Surfing Games in southern Japan. "So in the beach and ocean, coolest sport? Surfing. Streets, coolest sport? Skateboarding. Outdoor coolest sport? Climbing."

"So suddenly, in one giant stroke they add the three environments: the outdoor, the ocean and urban. It will be the single most important program change in decades, probably ever." Instead of leaning on the experience of established Olympic sports in preparing for Tokyo 2020, Aguerre thinks some of the traditional disciplines could learn a thing or two from surfing, which has also been provisionally included in the program for Paris 2024. "The old sports need to adapt," said Aguerre. "(IOC) President (Thomas) Bach is very clear about that from the first speech he made when he accepted his election he said 'change or be changed.'"

"The evolution of the species is one of those that change... or the ones that didn't change that are nowhere to be found." Some sports, including badminton, taekwondo and modern pentathlon, have come under pressure to justify their inclusion in the Olympics while question marks hang over the futures of weightlifting and boxing due to financial irregularities and doping scandals.

BUSY SURFING

Aguerre pushed hard for an Olympic slot after becoming ISA chief in 1994 but the seeds were sown 80 years earlier when surfing pioneer and Olympic gold medalist swimmer Duke Kahanamoku first proposed its inclusion at Stockholm 1912.

Yet it was not until Argentine Aguerre had a discussion with then-IOC presidential candidate Bach in 2013 that things began to gain traction. Three years later in Rio de Janeiro Aguerre finally got the news he had been hoping for. "It is something that I dreamed about for many, many, many years," said a beaming Aguerre. "It was very hard. Basically it seemed impossible for a couple of decades and then suddenly a set came and we were in the right place to paddle and catch that Olympic wave." While it took a long time for surfing to get on the Olympic program Aguerre puts it down to the carefree nature of the sport. On the evening of the vote in Rio three years ago, a journalist asked him why it had taken 100 years to get surfing into the Olympics.

"My answer is: 'maybe we were busy surfing,'" Aguerre laughed. "It is true, it sounds like a joke but in reality we are surfers. We are not really an organised sport to the point where you need fields, gloves, memberships, lockers, we don't have anything."

"Basically you arrive at the beach, wrap ourselves in a towel, put on a wetsuit if it is cold, get on the beach and then go." — Reuters