

Sports

Ferrari's Leclerc on pole in Russia with his fourth victory in a row

Hamilton pulls out dazzling final lap to take second ahead of Vettel

SOCHI: Charles Leclerc confirmed Ferrari's Formula One resurgence when he reeled off his fourth consecutive pole position with another stunning lap yesterday as he topped the times in qualifying for today's Russian Grand Prix.

The in-form Monegasque clocked a best lap of one minute and 31.628 seconds to improve his time in the final seconds and set up an end to Mercedes' five-year domination of the event since it began in 2014.

After three successive Ferrari wins, two by Leclerc, he appears set to extend the scarlet scuderia's run of current success to four races. His performance made him the first Ferrari driver since Michael Schumacher in 2001, when Leclerc was only three years old, to secure four straight poles.

Series leader and defending five-time champion Lewis Hamilton pulled out a dazzling final sector and final lap to take second ahead of Sebastian Vettel in the other Ferrari by a narrow margin.

Vettel, who won in Singapore last Sunday, was third ahead of Red Bull's Max Verstappen, who is set to take a grid penalty. Valtteri Bottas in the second Mercedes and Carlos Sainz of McLaren.

"The car felt amazing. It definitely feels amazing to be back on pole, but I don't know if it's the best track to start on pole," said Leclerc. "The straight at the start is very long. It definitely feels very special (to take four consecutive poles), but I don't want to think about those stats!"

Hamilton said he remained amazed at Ferrari's power and speed on the straights. "I tell you, it was a tough session. These guys have another level on the straights - jet mode. I gave it everything I had and the team was able to tinker and push forward... I didn't expect to get on the front row."

Vettel said: "Obviously I'm not entirely happy and extracted the maximum from the car. Turn One is a long way - and we're on different tyre strategies compared to

the Merics. Personally, I need a good start and then you worry about the race."

LOST CONTROL

The session began in dry and warm conditions following overnight rain with Hamilton, on softs, leading the way before a lurid spin from Williams' Robert Kubica was followed by Red Bull new boy Alex Albon crashing heavily at Turn 13. He lost control and went into the barriers, damaging the rear of his car. He was unhurt. This led to a brief red flag stoppage before Vettel went top ahead of Hamilton and Verstappen. Out went Alfa Romeo's Kimi Raikkonen ahead of his 307th start, which is set to put him third in the all-time list ahead of Michael Schumacher and Jenson Button, leaving only Fernando Alonso on 311 and Rubens Barrichello on 322 ahead of him.

The Finn was joined by Williams duo George Russell and Kubica, Albon and the luckless local hero Daniil Kvyat of Toro Rosso in making early exits. Kvyat took no part after requiring an engine change following final practice.

Leclerc topped the first runs in Q2 and stayed there ahead of Vettel with Verstappen third and the Mercedes men fourth and fifth, running on mediums. After a fierce scrap, both Renaults squeezed through to the top ten shootout and out went Pierre Gasly in the second Toro Rosso, Sergio Perez of Racing Point and Antonio Giovinazzi of Sauber ahead of Haas's Kevin Magnussen and Lance Stroll in the second Racing Point.

This left the usual suspects to fight it out for pole position with Ferrari revelling in their straight-line speed advantage to lead the way. Mercedes toiled to keep pace with them, but Hamilton was half a second slower than the Monegasque who appeared to be in supreme form as he sped around the former 2014 Olympic Park track before trimming that to grab a spot on the front row and split the Ferraris. — AFP



SOCHI: Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc (L) smiles next to Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton after taking pole position in the qualifying session for the Formula One Russian Grand Prix at The Sochi Autodrom Circuit in Sochi yesterday. — AFP



Sarah Al-Hawal wins gold at 9th Asian trap event

KUWAIT: Kuwait shooter Sarah Al-Hawal won the gold medal at the 9th Asian Championship trap event, being held in Almaty Kazakhstan. Second place went to the Kazakh shooter Anastasia and the third place went to China's Lexi Hong.

Al-Hawal dedicated her win to HH the Amir, HH the Crown Prince, government and people of Kuwait. She said this tournament comes as part of Kuwait Shooting Federation's plan to qualify Kuwaiti shooters for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, adding that she is preparing for the Asian Championship next November during which winners will qualify for the Olympics, as Kuwait has two shooters who already qualified and looking for more.

Sarah said she was happy for winning after competing with Asia's best, and lauded the support of KSF officials who provide all that is necessary to ensure winning in all arenas.

Thomas may target 2020 Giro rather than Tour de France

HARROGATE: Geraint Thomas has admitted a glut of talent at Team Ineos may force him to target the Giro d'Italia next season rather than bid for a second Tour de France title. The popular Welshman won the Tour in 2018 but came second behind his teammate, 21-year-old Egan Bernal in July.

Ineos will also welcome four-time winner Chris Froome back to action in October and have added Giro champion Richard Carapaz to their roster, making competition for leadership places ferocious. In Harrogate for the 2019 UCI world cycling championships Thomas cut a smooth relaxed figure at a press conference for the British team ahead of the epic 287km run from Leeds to Harrogate today.

"The difference between winning the Tour and coming second is huge, you come second and nobody cares," lamented Thomas, who said he had been able to relax more since losing the crown, and added he was unsure he would be back in France in 2020.

"I'm going to wait at least until I see the courses, the routes for the Giro and the Tour and then go from there," Thomas said. "You'd think Egan would want to ride (the Tour) again, obviously, being the defending champion," he admitted of his 2019 Tour co-captain who was better suited to the

ultra-mountainous route earlier this season. "Froomey, it's his big goal, he wants to win five," Thomas said of Froome's quest to join Eddy Merckx, Bernard Hinault, Jacques Anquetil and Miguel Indurain as the cyclists with the record amount of Grand Boucle wins. "I'm definitely not going to make a call until at least our December training camp," Thomas said.

'GET ME OUT OF BED'

The route for the Tour is revealed in October and the Giro in November. "Even if I did the Giro, it would still certainly excite me and get me out of bed in the morning," said Thomas, who has yet to win the Giro or the Vuelta a Espana.

Both Froome and Carapaz have won the Giro, while Bernal as a mountains specialist may actually be better suited to the Italian race than Thomas. The 33-year-old says his form has not peaked this season as it did in 2018 and will be riding for fellow Briton Ben Swift this weekend but could get in the mix if a large group arrive at Harrogate in today's world road title race.

Thomas is riding despite pulling out of the time-trial this week saying he was off form. "I'll stay in the wheels and try and hold on, obviously it would be amazing but maybe top five is the target," Thomas said on Friday. — AFP

DeChambeau takes two-shot lead at Safeway Open

SAN FRANCISCO: Bryson DeChambeau fired eight birdies in an eight-under par 64 on Friday to seize a two-shot lead over fellow American Nick Watney at the US PGA Tour Safeway Open in Napa, California.

DeChambeau, seeking sixth Tour title and his first since he won in Las Vegas last November, was buoyed by a couple of birdie bombs, including a 36-footer at the sixth hole and a 23-foot birdie putt at 14 — where he was in a fairway bunker off the tee.

His 21-foot eagle putt at 18 came up just short, but he tapped in for a final birdie and a 36-hole total of 132 on the Silverado course. "I made a couple of good putts, that was obviously awesome," world number 11 DeChambeau said after his second straight bogey-free round.

"I struck it better today. Honestly the key to my play these last couple of days was my wedge play," added DeChambeau, who was delighted with the performance of new wedges with stiffer graphite shafts.

Watney had eight birdies and a bogey in his seven-under 65 and was alone in second on 134, one stroke in front of a group of five players. World number six Justin Thomas headlined the group on 135 after a 64 that featured nine birdies and just one bogey. He was joined by Canadian Nick Taylor, who carded a 66, South African Dylan Frittelli who posted a 65 and Americans Adam Long and

Cameron Champ, who both shot 68. Thomas, who closed fast after a shaky start on Thursday, kept up the good work to put himself in contention heading into the weekend of his first start of the season. "I know that you can go low out here," he said. "It's a course that it's very short and the ball goes quite a long way with how firm it is."

"But because of how firm it is, you have to get it in the fairway and really have the correct angles into the greens, and I felt like I did a pretty good job of that today." Australian Adam Scott and American Andrew Landry, who shared the overnight lead, both slipped back, Scott carding a one-over 73 that left him six adrift and Landry with a 74.

Former NFL star Tony Romo, whose chances of making a first cut at a PGA Tour event looked promising after his first-round 70, plummeted down the leaderboard with a six-over 78 that left him four-over for the week.

The 39-year-old American, who played 14 seasons for the Dallas Cowboys, was playing on a sponsor exemption for the fourth time in a PGA event. Five-time major-winner Phil Mickelson, hoping for strong enough showings in the tour's early 2019-2020 tournaments to become a captain's pick for a 12th straight Presidents Cup team, also missed the cut, which fell at two-under, by two strokes. — AFP



NAPA: Bryson DeChambeau hits on the ninth hole during the second round of the Safeway Open at Silverado Resort in Napa, California. — AFP

McLaren to renew partnership with Mercedes from 2021

SOCHI: McLaren will renew their once-revered partnership with Mercedes from 2021, the German manufacturer and British racing team announced at the Russian Grand Prix yesterday. Mercedes will succeed Renault as McLaren's engine-supplier when their current contract ends next year.

The former champions have agreed a long-term deal with Mercedes that will run to 2024 and, if successful, beyond. The confirmation of the deal was made in a joint statement in which Mercedes motorsport boss Toto Wolff said he was delighted to "welcome McLaren back to the Mercedes-Benz racing family".

"We hope that this new long-term agreement marks another milestone for McLaren as they aim to take the fight to the sport's top teams, including our Mercedes works team," said Wolff. McLaren won 78 races, three drivers' championship titles and one constructors' title during their previous partnership with

Mercedes from 1995 to 2014 before an ill-fated return to Honda.

Championship leader and defending five-time champion Lewis Hamilton took his first title with McLaren-Mercedes in 2008. Mika Hakkinen won two titles with them in 1998 and 1999. McLaren are currently in a rebuilding period with a driver line up of Spaniard Carlos Sainz and British rookie Lando Norris.

The team is without a race win since 2012, but have recovered from a dismal spell to become one of the contenders for fourth place in this year's constructors' championship. McLaren team chief Zak Brown said: "This agreement is an important step in our long-term plan to return to success in Formula One."

The start of the new deal will coincide with the introduction of a new identity and set of rules for Formula One. Mercedes supply engines to their own factory team, Racing Point and Williams. — AFP

Old hand Valverde ready for cycling world title defence

HARROGATE: Established stars Peter Sagan and Alejandro Valverde face a potential generational shift today as the 2019 world cycling championships wrap up with an epic men's elite road race between Leeds to Harrogate.

The 2019 cycling season has been lit up by youthful riders. Egan Bernal won the Tour de France at 21. Tadej Pogacar finished third at the Vuelta at 20. Remco Evenepoel came second here in the time-trial at just 19. At the other end of the age scale is Valverde. The seasoned 39-year-old, is on flying form for the defence of his title despite giving flat-out performances at the Tour de France and the Vuelta, his Movistar team boss Eusebio Unzué told AFP.

"He's ready, he's always ready for the worlds. There is something about the world championships that makes him light up," said Unzué, who has directed Valverde for years at Movistar. "Spain have brought a strong team, but maybe this course is more open than at Innsbruck," Unzué, a Spaniard who is not involved with the national team, told AFP in Harrogate.

Valverde finally struck gold in 2018 after first finishing third four times and second twice. "If this race ends with a select group of riders going into the final kilometre, Valverde will be one of them unless something happens to him," the affable Unzué insisted.

Valverde says the race will finish that way. "There will be a small group of us because of the rain and the slope at the end suits me," Valverde said on Friday. The main challenge over Sunday's 287km (176miles) of likely rain-slick roads appears to be the seven technical laps around the tight Harrogate town centre, where crashes have occurred all week.

The wetter-than-usual late September in Yorkshire has opened the door for an unexpected winner. British ace Chris Froome is absent after a spring fall, while 2018 Tour de France champion the popular Welshman Geraint Thomas is riding despite pulling out of the time-trial this week saying he was off form.

"I'll stay in the wheels and try and hold on, obviously it would be amazing but maybe top five is the target," Thomas said on Friday.

THE BELGIAN CHALLENGE

The road race looks very much like a Belgian spring classic run on rainy, narrow roads over great distances. "I see a Belgian, maybe on a solo break," Unzué said straight-faced when asked if he thought Valverde would win.

The Belgian team is strong. Olympic champion Greg van Avermaet recently won the Quebec grand prix. Philippe Gilbert won the Paris-Roubaix cobbled classic this season before winning two stages in emphatic style at the Vuelta.

The 19-year-old Evenepoel won the junior road race and time trial at Innsbruck last season. If 30 or so riders come home together, that would offer a tantalising chance to three-time former winner the 29-year-old Slovak Sagan.

There could even be an Australian double in the men's marquee races. Rohan Dennis took the time trial and powerful puncher Michael Matthews has said repeatedly this week 'I'm here to win' in the road race.

The favourite is Dutch 24-year-old Mathieu van der Poel who told the Dutch press this week he dreams of adding the world title here to his European mountain-bike title and world cyclo-cross title. Frenchman Julian Alaphilippe, who started as the favourite last year but fell off the pace deep into the race, arrived in Yorkshire on Friday still on a high after his 14 days in the Tour de France yellow jersey.

"This will be the best year of my life with or without a world title," Alaphilippe told AFP. "But this world championships route suits me too," he added. Yorkshire is hosting the worlds after vast crowds gave the Tour de France a raucous welcome in 2014. The Tour de Yorkshire was also set up in the wake of that success. — AFP