

## Sports

# Despite Mercedes in comfort zone, Hamilton wary of threats to crown

**ISTANBUL:** Lewis Hamilton returns to the scene of a memorable triumph in pursuit of a record-equaling third Turkish Grand Prix win this weekend, but wary of more than one threat to his world championship crown. Eleven months on from a spectacular victory for Mercedes in treacherous rain-hit conditions that secured him his seventh drivers' title with three races remaining, the 36-year-old Briton is this year only two points ahead of Red Bull's Max Verstappen with seven to go.

That knife-edge advantage offers him little protection and he knows also that he may face a grid penalty if forced to take a fresh power unit, as the Dutchman did two weekends ago in Russia, for a contest likely to be run in similarly wet weather. Last year's event was the first at Istanbul Park for nine years and was run on a newly resurfaced and very slippery track that, like Sochi last month, conspired to deliver a high degree of jeopardy and drama.

On both occasions, Hamilton used his experience and race-craft to overcome inauspicious circumstances and deliver stunning victories rewarded by drawing level with Michael Schumacher's title tally and posting an unprecedented 100th F1 triumph. His goals this Sunday will be more prosaic as he seeks to beat Verstappen and protect, or extend, his advantage in their enthralling title scrap and to avoid a third collision between them following their crashes at Silverstone and Monza.

Verstappen, by contrast, seeks to erase the memory of a dismal race last year when after qualifying on the front row, he spun and flat-spotted his tyres on the way to sixth, his worst finish of the season. "It wasn't the best weekend for us, as a team," he said. "But I think it will be quite different circumstances this year - the track should be more 'grippy' and there will be a lot for us all to learn."

## Grosjean, Johnson take first steps to racing '22 Indy 500

**WASHINGTON:** Former Formula One racer Romain Grosjean and ex-US stock car driver Jimmie Johnson took their first steps toward competing in the 2022 Indianapolis 500 on Wednesday with a rookie orientation program. Frenchman Grosjean, a 10-time F1 podium finisher who had two runner-up efforts in his 2021 Indy-Car rookie campaign, and Johnson, a seven-time NASCAR season champion, had their session at the famed 2.5-mile (4km) Indy oval cut short by rain. Indy-Car officials deemed both drivers as having passed their rookie tests even though a downpour kept them both a few laps shy of completing their final phase of testing.

Both will complete their remaining laps the next time they drive onto the oval, which for Grosjean will be April 20-21, 2022 in an open test session at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Johnson, 46, could join Grosjean, 35, at the session if he commits to driving in next year's Indianapolis 500, set for May 29 with qualifying the

### 'Brilliant buzz' at Mercedes

Mercedes boss Toto Wolff conceded that it was "possible" that Hamilton would have a new fourth engine of the season and a grid penalty for Sunday's race, but stressed his squad were in a very positive mood. "There's been a brilliant buzz in the team over the last week or so," he said. "Being back on top of the podium was an incredible feeling, particularly after such a dramatic race. "And it was obviously made more special by Lewis's 100th race win. In the moment, milestones like this are exceptional, but I think it will take time for us to realize just how remarkable this period is and how privileged we are to be part of his journey. The final moments of the last race in Russia proved anything can happen in F1 and fortunes can change in the blink of an eye."

Having regained the momentum, Mercedes will strive to keep it, but Red Bull will want to snatch it back as a tribute to Honda, their engine suppliers, who are leaving F1 at the end of the year. The team plan to run in a special mainly white livery, which was intended for use at the cancelled Japanese Grand Prix, which has been replaced by the Turkish race.

"It always feels special to race for Honda, even without a special livery," said Verstappen. "For us and for Honda to miss out on Japan is a shame, but it's cool we can do something in Turkey instead. I'm excited to see it. Working with Honda has been a pleasure. They are super motivated every single race and super-passionate to deliver the best they can."

After his last-gasp disappointment at Sochi, where he missed out on a maiden victory by staying out on slicks in the rain while leading, Lando Norris will bid to consolidate his and McLaren's progress with another solid outing at a venue where Ferrari have been the most successful team. But with rain forecast to arrive for tomorrow and Sunday, it is difficult for anyone to make reliable plans or predictions. —AFP

weekend before. Grosjean drove a Honda-powered Andretti Autosport car after having competed last season for Dale Coyne Racing, with two runner-up efforts on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway road course but only one oval start.

"The emotions of ovals, for me, is very new," Grosjean said. "It's not something that's particularly comfortable. It's not like road courses or a street course where I know what to do and I know how to progress. "Here, I have to learn everything." Advising Grosjean on his first laps were 16-time Indy 500 starter Michael Andretti and 2016 pole sitter James Hinchcliffe. "It's funny," Grosjean said. "I wasn't that fast, but the lap was still 200 mph, which is fast, but it doesn't feel like it. It feels smooth and it flows. You can imagine during the race how can I get the momentum going. Qualifying? Yes, for sure it must be... pretty something."

Indy's rookie program has drivers take 10 laps at 205-210 mph, 15 laps between 210-215 mph and 15 laps above 215 mph. Both racers had most of the final session complete when rain hit. Johnson competed 18 times at Indy in a stock car but he went 25 mph faster than he had ever driven before at Indy. "The only thing that's similar is the fear," Johnson said. "It's way different, but I can I tell I'm not even at the limit of the car." —AFP



**ISTANBUL:** Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton talks during an interview at the paddock of the Intercity Istanbul Park yesterday. —AFP

### News in brief

#### England to have female ref in charge

**LONDON:** Kateryna Monzul will become the first woman to referee an England men's international when Gareth Southgate's team face Andorra in a World Cup qualifier tomorrow. The Ukrainian will be joined by assistant referees Maryna Striletska and Svitlana Grushko, both also from Ukraine, in an all-female on-pitch officiating team at the Estadi Nacional in Andorra la Vella. France's Stephanie Frappart - the first woman to referee a Champions League match - will be the video assistant referee, with other officiating roles filled by men. —AFP

#### MotoGP 2022 calendar unveiled

**PARIS:** The MotoGP world championship unveiled its 2022 calendar yesterday, with 21 races including first visits to Finland's KymiRing and Indonesia's Mandalika circuit. Marc Marquez, Fabio Quartararo and the rest of the field will roar into action beneath the floodlights of Qatar on March 6 in a 2022 season that runs through to Nov 6 at Valencia's Ricardo Tormo circuit. As well as the new races, there are five non-European destinations back on the itinerary after being cancelled due to COVID this year. Argentina, Japan, Thailand, Australia and Malaysia are all back in the fold. —AFP

#### Okagbare charged with doping

**PARIS:** Nigerian sprinter Blessing Okagbare has been charged after testing positive for human growth hormone and EPO, offences that forced her to pull out of the Tokyo Olympics, the Athletics Integrity Unit said yesterday. "The athlete has been charged with the presence and use of a prohibited substance following of Human Growth Hormone in a sample collected out-of-competition on 19th July in Slovakia and reported to the AIU on 30th July," the AIU said in a statement. It said Okagbare had also tested positive for the endurance-boosting drug EPO in a test in Nigeria on June 20. Okagbare denies all the charges and has requested that each of them be submitted to a disciplinary hearing, the AIU said. —AFP