

MALDONADO HOPING FOR 2017 RETURN TO F1, SAYS MANAGER

LONDON: Venezuelan driver Pastor Maldonado has not given up on Formula One and hopes to be back next year after being dropped by the Renault-owned Lotus team, his manager Nicolas Todt said yesterday.

"I don't see any concrete opportunity for Formula One this year," the Frenchman told Reuters. "We will try to bounce back in 2017."

The Frenchman, son of International Automobile Federation (FIA) president and former Ferrari team principal Jean Todt, said the decision to replace Maldonado had come late in the day but

the split was amicable.

Maldonado announced on Monday, in a statement posted on Twitter, that he would not be on the starting grid when the season starts in Australia on March 20. The only Venezuelan to win a grand prix, with Williams in 2012, the driver did not say what he planned to do or give any reason for his absence.

Media reports indicated, however, that his backers, the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA that has paid tens of millions of dollars in sponsorship, had missed scheduled payments to the team. PDVSA has been hit by plunging

oil prices and economic crisis in Venezuela, which is in recession and where annual inflation has risen to almost 150 percent.

"I don't want to go into the details of the contract," said Todt. "The agreement was terminated in a friendly manner with Renault so no hard feelings. They behaved very fairly."

Denmark's Kevin Magnussen is set to replace Maldonado, with the team expected to be renamed as Renault following the French carmaker's takeover of the Lotus team in December, alongside British rookie Jolyon Palmer.

The team are due to hold a news conference in Paris on Wednesday to announce their line-up, managerial structure and future plans.

Manor, Formula One's smallest team who competed as Marussia last year and finished last overall with no points, are the only ones yet to contract any drivers for 2016 but Todt ruled out Maldonado going there.

The Frenchman, who was also manager to the late Marussia driver Jules Bianchi and represents Brazilian Felipe Massa at Williams, said Manor were a better fit for a young driver starting out

than a 30-year-old race winner like Maldonado.

Manor, who need their drivers to bring substantial sponsorship to make up the team budget, have been linked to Indonesian rookie Rio Haryanto who is trying to raise \$16 million to secure the seat. Mercedes's German reserve driver Pascal Wehrlein is another leading candidate now that the champions are providing Manor with engines.

"Manor are not really an option," said Todt. "After five years at Williams and Lotus...with all due respect to Manor, it makes no sense for Pastor." — Reuters

MCILROY INSPIRED BY 'UNREAL' DJOKOVIC

DUBAI: Four-time Major winner Rory McIlroy can't beat Novak Djokovic at his own game but he can share Olympic gold medal victory honours with the Serbian ace later this year in Rio de Janeiro.

This would be McIlroy's Brazil dream when golf returns to the Summer Olympics in August. McIlroy was firstly in awe watching TV coverage last week of Djokovic's clinical four sets Australian Open semi-final defeat of Roger Federer and he gleaned further inspiration from the Serbian's three-set demolition of Andy Murray to win an 11th Grand Slam title.

It was the 28-year old Djokovic's sixth Australian Open title and his fifth in the past six years as he closes in on Federer's all-time best of 17 Grand Slam titles.

McIlroy still has some catching-up to do having won four Majors, but he is looking forward to completing his own golfing career Grand Slam in April's Masters at Augusta National.

McIlroy said he had been introduced to Djokovic when dating former fiancée Caroline Wozniacki.

"I know Novak well and living in Monaco, as he does, I got to know him when I found myself also spending a bit of time there," said McIlroy. "But then his performance in the Australian Open was unreal, unreal."

"For the first two sets in the semi against Federer, I've never seen tennis like it and it was just incredible. "Novak is just on another level at the moment and from where he was when he won his first 'Slam' in 2008 to where he is now, is just amazing."

"So I find watching the tennis he played in Australia very inspirational given the dedication he's shown to his game along with his work ethic."

"And it would be nice in going to Rio for the Olympic Games to hopefully come away what he more than likely should earn,

and that's a gold medal."

FOND MEMORIES

McIlroy spent yesterday on the Emirates Club practice range and putting green but without taking to the course ahead of Thursday's defence of his Dubai Desert Classic title.

He spent last week at the nearby Els Club working on his game following a third place finish in the Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship before posting a 71 last Sunday to finish T4th in the Abu Dhabi Invitational.

"The time I spent this past week at the Els Club was good but then I also took a few days off to chill a little bit, as the weather wasn't great but overall my game feels good," he said.

"But after contesting the Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship I did need to work on certain aspects of my game and I've managed to get them sorted out."

McIlroy will tee-up Thursday with very fond memories of the Emirates Course having first contested the event in 2006 as an amateur and then, after completing his first round, being handed a long-lens camera by one of the accredited photographers to walk inside the ropes following then world number one Tiger Woods, who competed in the afternoon.

McIlroy captured a maiden pro career title winning the 2009 Dubai Desert Classic and sealed success again a year ago.

"I have so many fond memories as I basically commenced my career here, I got my first pro victory here and now I'm back this year as the defending champion, so a lot of good stuff has happened to me here," he said. "The good thing also is I have won out at Jumeirah Resort twice before in the DP World Tour championship and it would be nice this week to win back-to-back out here in Dubai." —AFP



SAN DIEGO: Brandt Snedeker holds the Farmers Insurance Open trophy and a ceremonial surfboard after the final round of the Farmers Insurance Open golf tournament Monday, in San Diego. Snedeker finished his final round Sunday before it was suspended because of inclement weather and did not have to play Monday. — AP

WORTH WAIT AS SNEDEKER LIFTS TORREY PINES TROPHY

LOS ANGELES: American Brandt Snedeker won the weather-hit Farmers Insurance Open without hitting a shot on Monday as his closest pursuers succumbed to brutal conditions in southern California.

Snedeker carded a brilliant three-under-par 69 on Sunday, completing his round shortly before play was halted due to unplayable conditions at Torrey Pines outside San Diego.

He was one stroke behind on-course leader Jimmy Walker at the time and thought it most unlikely his score would hold up for victory. But Snedeker caught a lucky break when the winds that buffeted the field on Sunday continued to whip across the course on Monday, causing havoc among those who had to complete the round.

Walker, who had eight holes left, was among those who struggled when play resumed at 11am local time. The event was completed in a

surreal atmosphere as players picked their way between gum trees felled by the winds, and competed in funeral silence due to the absence of spectators who were barred from the course due to the dangerous conditions.

Nobody could match the score posted by Snedeker who finished at six-under 282 for his eighth career victory on the PGA Tour. He finished one stroke ahead of South Korean KJ Choi who missed a long birdie putt at the last that would have forced a playoff.

Walker tied for fourth, three shots back. After a nervy, sleepless night, Snedeker passed time on the practice putting green in case he was needed for a playoff, watching bits of the action on a television monitor.

"I can't tell you how excited I am to be the champion again and how unbelievable the last 48 hours have been," Snedeker, 35, told the Golf Channel.

"Everything worked out perfectly for me. You cannot make up the extreme events that had to happen for me to have this chance. They all fell in line for me perfectly. I hate watching this stuff because I am in no control."

"I would not have guessed it this morning when I woke up. I would have thought best-case scenario was a playoff."

Snedeker's victory came after he made the cut with nothing to spare on Friday, the first time a player has gone on to win from such a position since 2010.

Half of his PGA Tour victories have come in California, two at Torrey Pines and two at Pebble Beach, and he has now won seven times since the start of the 2011 season, a number bettered only by Rory McIlroy (10) and Tiger Woods (eight). "I wish we could play all year out here on the West Coast because I play fantastic and love being out here," he said. —Reuters

JAPAN TOUR KEEN TO SPREAD WINGS WITHOUT STRUCTURAL CHANGE

SINGAPORE: The Japan Golf Tour Organisation (JGTO) are keen to increase their involvement in co-sanctioned events abroad but remain opposed to any radical changes to Asia's organisational structure, a senior director told Reuters.

The JGTO, along with the well-established China Golf Association, Korean Tour and Australian PGA have seen the golf market in the region muddled by a turf war between the Asian Tour and OneAsia circuits over recent years.

The Asian Tour resumed merger talks with the European Tour last month but JGTO official Kenji Tanaka said China, Australia, Korea, Japan and others were better off running their own circuits rather than signing up to a single overlord.

"It's necessary to have individual country tours because if there is only one tour, only a limited number of players can play that tour," he told Reuters through a translator at last week's Singapore Open.

"Right now, we are a member of the (International Golf) Federation... we are very much satisfied with that situation. Also we have lots of historical tournaments in Japan, some are 40 years old."

The JGTO is the largest circuit in the continent with 25 events for the 2016 season, offering a wealthier prize pool and more tournaments than the Asian or OneAsia Tours.

Tanaka said his body would like to expand to 30 events with the help of the European and Asian Tours as well as the US PGA Tour, who made a big drive in the continent by setting up the 12-tournament

PGA Tour of China in 2014.

FIRST MAJOR

"As you know, the domestic Japan tournaments start in April. During the winter, it's too cold to have a tournament in Japan. It snowed in Tokyo last week, so it would be nice to have co-sanctioned events during that time," he said.

"Then the players can prepare for April start. There is still room since there is a gap after next week." The Singapore Open and the Myanmar Open, which starts on Thursday, are two of four events the JGTO co-organise with the Asian Tour, with the Panasonic Open and Asia Pacific Diamond Cup taking place in Japan later in the year.

After next week's Myanmar event, the JGTO takes a two-month break before the Token Homemate Cup tees off in Nagoya on April 17. Tanaka said increasing tournament numbers overseas would also help Japanese male players improve their chances of winning a first major, saying he wanted more to follow Hideki Matsuyama and Ryo Ishikawa's example of playing around the world.

"This will be an advantage for our players to experience other countries and other golf courses and communicate with other players so they improve technique," he said as he watched South Korean Song Younghan pip world number one Jordan Spieth to the Singapore title on Monday.

"Foreign golf courses are different. It is easy to travel inside Japan but for the young players going outside to learn something different benefits them." — Reuters

NEW BOYS FITZPATRICK, DECHAMBEAU AIMING HIGH

DUBAI: Having acquired a taste for representing Europe in a team tournament, Matthew Fitzpatrick has made qualifying for the Ryder Cup later in the year a big goal of his.

The 21-year-old Englishman was the toast of the European Tour last year when he won the British Masters in his debut season and finished 12th in the Race to Dubai with nine other top-10 finishes.

On the eve of the Dubai Desert Classic this week, Fitzpatrick, who has risen to 44th in the world rankings, said representing the European team in the EurAsia Cup under captain Darren Clarke has made him hungry for more such experiences.

"Yeah, definitely. It's made me definitely want to get there in September. The team atmosphere was great. Everyone was sort of having a good laugh and just enjoying themselves," said Fitzpatrick, who is currently third in the European Points List for the Ryder Cup.

"I think that was the big thing that Darren tried to promote, as well, is that you just want to go out there and enjoy yourself and normally when that happens, you play your best golf."

"I think that's the sort of mentality that I'm trying to take personally into each week. "I don't write anything down (his goals for the season). I think for me personally, they change all the time with the position that I'm in."

"I'm hovering around the top-50 right now, so it's trying to get higher than that. "Obviously, everyone is trying to win every tournament they play. So, that's my goal as well." The Dubai Desert Classic has attracted such star names as world number two and defending champion Rory McIlroy, and world number six and 2007 champion Henrik Stenson.

GOLF SCIENTIST

Also in the mix is American amateur champion Bryson DeChambeau, who stole the limelight on the opening day of Abu Dhabi HSBC Golf Championship by taking the lead with a superb effort of eight-under par 64.

The 22-year-old DeChambeau, who is planning to turn professional after playing the Masters this year, then beat a quality field that included McIlroy in a one-day Pro-Am event in Abu Dhabi, where he shot the best round of the day - a seven-under par 65 - at Yas Links. DeChambeau, who played the two Desert

Swing European Tour events in Abu Dhabi and Doha, felt he was tiring a bit after spending five weeks on the road, but he was looking forward to another exciting week in his journey.

"The past two weeks, it's been fun. I have learned a lot. Messed up a couple times but that's how it goes as an intern, so it's fun," said DeChambeau, who likes to call himself a golf scientist. "It's great confidence, no doubt, to shoot low numbers like that, and I know I can do it. It's just a matter of staying in the moment and staying in your rhythm and getting your job done."

"Unfortunately I have not been in the best frame of mind, and I am working on that, figuring out how to deal with some different things. It's been a long journey, I can tell you that, and I'm definitely sensing when I'm breaking down."

"If I can get that past me and work on focusing on the next shot in hand, I think I can do pretty well."

The Dubai Desert Classic, which forms the third leg of the European Tour's Desert Swing, was first played in 1989 and is the oldest championship in the Middle East. —AFP



SAN DIEGO: Kevin Strelman hits his tee shot on the 16th hole at Torrey Pines during the completion of the suspended final round of the Farmers Insurance Open golf tournament Monday, in San Diego. —AP



SAN DIEGO: Freddie Jacobson, from Sweden, pitches his third shot to the 15th green at Torrey Pines during the completion of the suspended final round of the Farmers Insurance Open golf tournament Monday, in San Diego. —AP