

PETRUCCI FASTEST IN CRASH-FILLED SEPANG TESTING

KUALA LUMPUR: Italian Danilo Petrucci topped the timesheets yesterday in an incident-packed second day of pre-season MotoGP testing at Malaysia's Sepang circuit featuring a dramatic high speed tyre blow-out involving Frenchman Loris Baz.

In track temperatures of almost 50 degrees Celsius (122 F), Petrucci on a Ducati was among the few riders who improved their times by adapting well to

the sizzling weather and new Michelin tyres. The 25-year-old Italian clocked 2min 00.095sec, 0.060 seconds faster than Spaniard Jorge Lorenzo who dominated Monday's practice on his Yamaha.

Lorenzo, the 2015 MotoGP world champion who is chasing a fourth championship title, fell at Turn 5 while Honda's Dani Pedrosa crashed at the same place in the final 30 minutes of testing.

Neither rider was injured. Baz, who

celebrated his 23rd birthday on Monday, earlier escaped serious injury when his rear tyre exploded and hurled him off his Ducati bike in a spectacular high-speed crash.

The Frenchman was travelling at around 290 kilometres per hour (180 mph) along the Sepang circuit's main straightaway at the time. He credited his protective gear for his escape.

Hector Barbera of Spain on a Ducati

finished third, 0.292 seconds behind Petrucci. Honda's double MotoGP world champion Marc Marquez was fourth-fastest, 0.748 seconds off the pace.

British rider Cal Crutchlow on a Honda was fifth, with a time of 2mins 0.899 seconds. Valentino Rossi, the charismatic 36-year-old Italian rider, finished the session in sixth position, 0.926 seconds behind Ducati's Petrucci.

Retired double world champion

Casey Stoner, back on track testing for Ducati, was ninth fastest, 1.008 seconds behind Petrucci. This is the first time since 2012 the Australian is riding alongside the MotoGP race riders.

On Monday Lorenzo clocked 2min 0.684sec, just over one second faster than Rossi. The three-day testing at Sepang ends today. The MotoGP world championship begins at the Losail circuit in Qatar on March 17. —AFP

KUWAIT LOSE PREMISE, PRESIDENCY OF ASPU

KUWAIT: President of the Asian Sports Press Union Faisal Al-Qinae said Kuwait lost the premise and presidency of ASPU, which will go to Bahrain with a new president, Bahrain's Mohammad Qasim, who had shown notable activity lately at the Asian continent level.

Al-Qinae said Kuwait failed to keep the union which did not receive one dinar to support its plans and programs as promised by Qinae when he became president.

This took place due to the stubbornness of Finance Ministry undersecretary, Al-Qinae added, and his rejection to allocate a budget for the union which put the union and Kuwait in a peculiar position in front of

the International Sport Press Association and in front of Asian countries, which allowed the Bahraini candidate to take over, and move the premise to Bahrain where the government had allocated a budget to host the premise and presidency.

Al-Qinae said Kuwait Press lost an important media stand that is difficult to replace because of a personal stand by finance ministry undersecretary.

He wished the new ASPU president success and congratulated Bahrain for getting the premise. He also wished Kuwait's candidate for executive committee membership Sattam Al-Sahly all the success during the Feb 12 elections in Manama.

PANTHERS AND BRONCOS MEET REPORTERS AT MEDIA CIRCUS

SAN JOSE: What happens when you put Peyton Manning, Miss Universe, an orange-and-blue leprechaun and 200 TV cameras into the same room?

Answer: Super Bowl Opening Night. The NFL took a good idea gone surreal - what used to be known as "Media Day" - gave it a new name, added a live cover band and moved the whole thing to prime time Monday to kick off Super Bowl week between the Denver Broncos and Carolina Panthers.

This new and amped-up interview-fest came complete with a guy walking around inside an inflatable football and a newly choreographed players' introduction that involved all 60 players from each team walking out onto a four-story-high catwalk.

"I had no idea that was a bridge we were standing on," said Manning, getting ready for his fourth Super Bowl. And yet, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

"Will you kiss my wife?" one questioner shouted to Panthers QB Cam Newton, who answered his hour's worth of questions with a sports-drink-themed towel wrapped around his head.

"I don't think I can do that," Newton said. Suffice to say, Manning and Newton - one a five-time MVP, the other a strong favorite to win his first later this week - couldn't have seen a lot of this coming, no matter how hard they prepared.

Who would play you in a movie? "Maybe a young Robert Redford," Manning said. Another reporter - or make that, person with a credential - asked Manning to look into the camera and wish a Happy Chinese New Year to all his friends in that part of the world.

At one point, a reporter from a Spanish-language station cranked up some bass-heavy music and pleaded with Newton to dance. He passed. "Got to be feeling it," he explained.

All of this thoughtfully brought to prime time by the NFL for the first time in the 50-year history of the Super Bowl.

For decades, Media Day was a Tuesday-at-noonish affair - scheduled so as not to interrupt the teams' schedules and to give writers the rest of the week to craft the stories. But this year, the NFL moved it to Monday night, where minor details like dress code, off-color banter and 8-year-olds asking football players questions after bedtime barely raise an eyebrow.

NFL spokesman Michael Signora described the scheduling change as one that allows "more fans (to) experience what has grown to become a very unique, popular Super Bowl event."

Conveniently, the NFL-owned NFL Network captured all the action live.

Surprising they didn't do this earlier. It's a nod to the reality that "Media Day" has long been a "journalism-free zone" - one in which fans have willingly, for the last five years, paid money for tickets that allow them to sit in the stands and watch the madness unfold.

Speaking of which ...

Late in the Broncos session, Rocky the Leprechaun - a regular at Broncos games over the years - laid a dollar bill out on the blue carpeting of SAP Center and waited to see if someone would pick it up. Several minutes passed. Nobody did. "Crazy to see that," he said.

WHAT MAKES THIS WEEK SO GREAT?

"There's a lot of happiness," said the gnome-turned-sociologist. "This world needs all the happiness it can get."

Only one team will be happy come Sunday night. The Panthers are favored. Manning is a sentimental favorite; at 39, many people expect he'll retire after this one. That was one of the few actual news angles being worked on during Denver's hour of fun behind the mic.

"I haven't made up my mind and I don't see myself knowing until the season's over," Manning said. Also, the Broncos were involved in a minor bus crash after practice. There were no injuries. "Just adds to the intrigue of what we've had all year," Manning said.

Back to the important stuff. Miss Universe, one of the 5,500 "reporters" with credentials for Super Bowl-week festivities, answered more questions than she asked. Most had to do with Steve Harvey. "Yes, I am the real Miss Universe," she said, referencing Harvey's embarrassing gaffe a few weeks back.

Harvey was a no-show at this one. No one missed him. From the costumes, to the beauty queens, to the guys dressed up like Sesame Street's Swedish Chef, this prime-time special had pretty much everything - except for Donald Trump, who was waiting on caucus results in Iowa.

Manning was asked to recollect a meeting with Trump a few years back. Maybe someday, Newton will meet The Donald, too. "I tell kids, that oval-shaped pigskin can take you a lot of places," said the Panthers quarterback, who won the national college championship with Auburn a few years back. "It's taken me to the White House."

And to this place. Kickoff is less than a week away. —AP



RIO DE JANEIRO: Rio2016 Olympic Games Organizing Committee Medical Director Joao Grangeiro (C) speaks during a press conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil yesterday. Rio Olympics organizers said yesterday they are concerned by the outbreak of the Zika virus in Brazil, but confident the problem will have cleared up by the time of the Games. — AFP

BRAZIL ISSUES OLYMPICS WARNING AS WHO DECLARES ZIKA EMERGENCY

GENEVA: Brazil warned pregnant women Monday to stay away from the Olympics after the World Health Organization declared an international emergency over the Zika virus, blamed for causing a surge in brain-damaged babies. The UN health body said that a surge in cases of microcephaly - a devastating condition in which a baby is born with an abnormally small head and brain - was likely caused by the mosquito-borne virus, and declared the situation a "public health emergency of international concern."

That prompted an unprecedented warning from Brazil, just six months from the Olympics opening ceremony on August 5 in Rio de Janeiro. "The risk, which I would say is serious, is for pregnant women. It is clearly not advisable for you (to travel to the Games) because you don't want to take that risk," said President Dilma Rousseff's chief of staff, Jaques Wagner.

Wagner sought to downplay fears for Olympic athletes and fans who are not expectant mothers. "I understand that no one needs to be afraid if you are not pregnant," he said. However, some health officials also blame the Zika virus for causing Guillain-Barre syndrome, a rare disorder in which the immune system attacks the nervous system, causing weakness and sometimes paralysis.

That syndrome directly affects Zika patients themselves. Most recover, but the syndrome is sometimes deadly. Zika was first detected in Uganda in 1947, but it was considered a relatively mild disease until the current outbreak was declared in Latin America last year.

Brazil was the first country to sound the alarm on the apparent link with birth defects, after health authorities noticed a surge in babies born with microcephaly.

It has since become the worst affected country, with some 4,000 suspected cases of microcephaly, of which 270 have been confirmed, up from 147 in 2014. The WHO said that French Polynesia had also seen a spike in microcephaly cases during a Zika outbreak there two years ago. The outbreak has sown panic in the Americas, where the WHO says it is "spreading explosively" and predicts up to four million Zika cases this year alone.

Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Jamaica and Puerto Rico have warned women not to get pregnant, while the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has advised expectant mothers against traveling to affected countries.

The WHO is under pressure to move swiftly to tackle Zika, after admitting it was slow to respond to the recent Ebola outbreak that ravaged parts of west Africa.

WHO chief Margaret Chan said a meeting of health experts who make up the agency's emergency committee had agreed "a causal relationship between the Zika infection during pregnancy and microcephaly is strongly suspected, though not scientifically proven."

"The clusters of microcephaly and other neurological complications constitute an extraordinary event and a public health threat to other parts of the world," she said.

'EXPLOSION' OF NERVE DISORDER

Colombia, which has reported more than 20,000 Zika infections, including 2,100 in pregnant women, warned it had seen an "explosion" of Guillain-Barre syndrome cases, and was expecting more.

"We are currently talking about a rate of 2.3 cases of Guillain-Barre for every 1,000 patients with Zika. That is quite a lot," Health Minister Alejandro Gaviria said on Colombian radio.

Since Colombia is forecasting about 657,000 cases of Zika during the epidemic, it expects over 1,500 cases of Guillain-Barre, he said. Panama, meanwhile, said it had registered 50 Zika cases.

Jitters over the virus have spread far beyond the affected areas to Europe and North America, where dozens of cases have been identified among returning travelers.

The WHO is looking to take resolute action on Zika after stinging criticism over its response to Ebola, which has killed more than 11,000 people

in West Africa since late 2013.

Ebola was declared a global health emergency in August 2014 and continues to carry that label. The WHO stressed the need up work to improve diagnostics and develop a vaccine for Zika. There is currently no specific treatment for the virus, which causes flu-like symptoms and a rash. The virus is transmitted by the Aedes aegypti mosquito, which also spreads dengue fever, and which is found everywhere in the Americas except Canada and Chile. — AFP

BRONCOS' MANNING SAYS NO DECISION YET ON RETIREMENT

SAN JOSE: Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning said yesterday he has not yet decided whether he will retire following Super Bowl 50 and that he is strictly focused on winning his second NFL championship.

Manning's NFL plans are expected to be a common talking point in the leadup to his fourth Super Bowl appearance on Feb. 7 against the Carolina Panthers, but the 39-year-old future Hall of Famer said he is unsure.

"I haven't made my mind up and I don't see myself knowing that until after the season's over," Manning said during his session at Super Bowl 50 media night.

Manning, one of the best quarterbacks the NFL has ever seen, has been plagued by injury and questionable form this season and has seemed to have lost arm strength.

His younger brother, two-time Super Bowl winner Eli Manning of the New York Giants, said last week that if he retires he hopes Peyton can "go out on top."

Peyton himself was caught on camera after the AFC Championship game telling opposing coach Bill Belichick of the New England

Patriots that "this might be my last rodeo."

But Manning insists he is strictly fixed on the game. "Not looking too far ahead, not looking too far back has really helped me this season," he said. "It's really served me well up to this point. I'm going to stick to that philosophy."

"I am excited about this week and looking forward to playing in this game. And I'm going to focus on that and deal with all of the other stuff after this."

Manning was more forthcoming when asked about his Super Bowl counterpart, 26-year-old Cam Newton, who led all quarterbacks in the regular season with 45 touchdowns, including 10 rushing scores.

"He's just had an incredible year. There's no doubt in my mind that he's going to be the (season's) MVP," said Manning, the only player ever to win the league's top honor five times.

"What he's done in the short time being an NFL quarterback has been awesome, awesome. That's the best word I can think of. He's been a great passer, a great runner and a great leader." —Reuters



SAN JOSE: Miss Universe Pia Alonzo Wurtzbach dances with Carolina Panthers players during Opening Night for the NFL Super Bowl 50 football game Monday, in San Jose, Calif. — AP



ENGLEWOOD: In this March 20, 2012, file photo, Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning and executive vice president of football operations John Elway pose during an NFL football news conference at the team's headquarters in Englewood, Colo. Elway is one of the very few to say he won it all, then simply walked away. Now, Peyton Manning is trying to follow in Elway's footsteps, wearing the same Broncos uniform Elway wore when he walked off into the sunset nearly 20 years ago. — AP