

PREVIEW

ROSSI REACHES 350 RACES IN BATTLE OF AGES

BUENOS AIRES: Valentino Rossi races in a record-setting 350th grand prix in Argentina tomorrow determined to prove that at 38 he will not be overshadowed by teammate Maverick Vinales, who blitzed the season-opener in Qatar.

Rossi, a nine-time world champion, was third in the rain and wind of the Qatari desert after starting from 10th on the grid on a weekend when Vinales, 16 years his junior, dominated on his first outing for Yamaha. "It wasn't an easy start to the championship but I was very happy to be able to get on the podium," said Rossi. "Now we go to

Argentina. This is a track that I like very much and I'm happy to go there. I hope that there are good asphalt conditions because last year it was difficult for us." Rossi came home in second place at the dusty and hot Termas de Rio Hondo circuit in Argentina last year having taken victory 12 months earlier.

But his former teammate Jorge Lorenzo, whose decision to move to Ducati opened the door for Vinales at Yamaha, believes that the flying Spaniard could end up making Rossi feel his age this season.

"It's nothing easy for Valentino to keep racing MotoGP at his age," Lorenzo told

www.motorsports.com. "The second oldest rider is maybe 32, and he's 38. I guess when you become 38 every season is tougher than the one before; that's something Rossi recognises himself. You don't see many 38-year-olds as fast as Rossi. "It's not something easy and even less when you have an outstanding and strong teammate like Maverick."

However, former Suzuki pilot Vinales, who became the second youngest rider to win in the premier class for two different manufacturers, just behind Mike Hailwood with his Qatar triumph, recognises that he is already a marked man. "We have the difficult

challenge to continue getting good results, Qatar was only the first race of 18," said the Spaniard. "I can feel the pressure a little bit because the level of my rivals is very high, but that motivates me even more to keep working hard. We have to be cautious, work step by step and race by race."

The Argentina race is also a key test for defending world champion Marc Marquez after the Spaniard managed just fourth place in Qatar on his Honda. "I must fight for the podium," said the Spaniard, a two-time winner at the race and world champion in 2013, 2014 and 2016. — AFP

F1 CONFIRMS FINAL EDITION OF MALAYSIAN GP IN OCTOBER

SHANGHAI: The Malaysian Grand Prix will hold its final edition on Oct 1, bringing an end to one of the longest-running Formula One races in Asia after struggling in recent years to attract fans and local television viewers. The announcement, which was made yesterday by F1 officials at the Chinese Grand Prix and the Malaysian government, had been anticipated after the country's sports minister indicated late last year that the race's contract would not be renewed when it expires in 2018. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said yesterday the government had decided to pull out of F1 because of the high cost of staging the event and declining ticket sales and tourism figures.

"Hosting the F1 has helped promote the country as a destination for international sports and tourism. However, it's time for the government to assess the F1 race due to the changes since we first hosted the race in 1999," Najib said in a statement. Competition from other races in Asia has taken a toll on the Malaysian GP. In his statement, Najib noted that when the race was first held at Sepang International Circuit nearly two decades ago, there was only one other Asian country on the F1 calendar, Japan. Now, six Asian countries host F1 races, including nearby Singapore, which has one of the most popular races, run at night through the city streets.

"It's always sad to say goodbye to a member of the Formula One family," Sean Bratches, F1 managing director for commercial operations, said in Shanghai. "Malaysian Formula One fans have proven themselves to be some of the most passionate supporters." Malaysia's withdrawal from F1 comes at a time when the sport is making a push to increase its presence in North America. F1 returned to the United States in 2012 with a race in Austin, Texas, and Bratches said at the Australian Grand Prix last month that the US market would continue to be a focus for the sport. The French Grand Prix will also return to the F1 calendar in 2018 after a 10-year absence.

Although Malaysia will no longer host a race after this year, its state oil company, Petronas, will continue to sponsor the Mercedes team, the prime minister said in his statement. — AP



KUALA LUMPUR: Sepang International Circuit (SIC) Chairman Mohamed Azman Yahya (L) and CEO Razlan Razali speak to the media in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. This year's Malaysian Grand Prix is set to be the country's last, Prime Minister Najib Razak said yesterday, citing rising costs and falling ticket sales. — AFP

MOTOR RACING



SHANGHAI: Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton looks at his mobile phone after signing autographs for fans in pit lane during the second practice session ahead of the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai yesterday. — AFP

SHANGHAI MIST WIPES OUT FIRST DAY OF CHINA GP

SHANGHAI: The Shanghai weather all but wiped out the first two practice sessions for the Chinese Formula One Grand Prix yesterday with poor visibility in the city forcing the grounding of the medical support helicopter.

Drivers were only able to run for 22 of the scheduled 90 minute opening session while second practice was wiped out altogether. Visibility at the track, on the outskirts of Shanghai, was good enough for helicopters to fly, with television choppers hovering overhead throughout the day.

Foggier conditions in the city meant the medical helicopter would have been unable to land at the designated hospital, 38km from the circuit, a spokesperson from the sport's governing International Automobile Federation (FIA) said.

Track action has to be halted if the medical helicopter cannot fly or if an ambulance cannot reach the designated hospital within 20 minutes, according to FIA safety procedures. Only 14 drivers completed timed laps, with neither championship favourite Lewis

Hamilton of Mercedes nor Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel, winner of last month's season-opening race in Australia, setting times. "It's not good for the fans watching on TV and even worse for all those people in the stands, who have paid money to come out here from the city or even from other countries," triple world champion Hamilton told reporters. "We need to work together with the FIA and (commercial rights holder) FOM to find a solution or an alternative plan of some kind when we have circumstances like this in the future."

Teenager Max Verstappen's opening session-topping effort of one minute, 50.491 seconds in damp and drizzly conditions remained the fastest time of the day. The Dutchman's lap was more than 15 seconds slower than retired world champion Nico Rosberg's pole position effort last year, an indication of the limited benefit of the curtailed session. Hamilton and Vettel are expected to battle for victory tomorrow but will only have a final hour-long practice session ahead of qualify-

ing on Saturday to prepare for what is predicted to be a wet race.

Hamilton, who has yet to drive on the new rain tyres introduced this year, expressed apprehension about racing in the rain, while Vettel goes into the weekend feeling more relaxed.

"Pretty comfortable for this grand prix, I hope still, despite the weather," the German said. "I think the forecast for tomorrow is quite good so we get a lot more running." With action curtailed, fans who braved the cool temperatures and inclement weather found other ways to amuse themselves. A fan dressed as the main villain from the "Star Wars" movie series was given a fair amount of television exposure, with producers even running the caption "Darth Vader, Sith Lord" to accompany the images. Hamilton crossed the track to the grandstands to wave at his cheering fans before throwing signed merchandise up to them. The Briton, the most successful driver in China with four wins, is hoping to strike back at a resurgent Ferrari tomorrow. — Reuters