

MOTOR RACING

HAMILTON FASTEST IN FIRST PRACTICE SESSIONS FOR AUSTRALIAN GP

MELBOURNE: Lewis Hamilton delivered the faster speeds that Formula One rule changes had promised yesterday, going under the racing lap record in the second practice session for the season-opening Australian Grand Prix.

The three-time world champion had the fastest time in morning practice and his afternoon time of 1 minute, 23.620 seconds was quicker than the racing lap mark Michael Schumacher set in winning the 2004 title at the 5.303-kilometer (3.295-mile) Albert Park Circuit.

It was only one-tenth slower than the best ever lap of Albert Park, which Sebastien Vettel set to take pole position in 2011.

"I'm super happy to be back in the car - particularly after a first day like that. It was 99 percent perfect," Hamilton said. "We've shown good form so far on both the long and short runs and we got every lap done that we wanted to."

Ferrari driver Vettel split the Mercedes cars of Hamilton and Valtteri Bottas, who posted the fastest two times in the opening practice earlier yesterday, with his 1:24.167 in the afternoon session.

Kimi Raikkonen's afternoon run meant the Ferraris were second and fourth - a reflection of their positive pre-season testing in Barcelona - and pushed the

Red Bulls of Daniel Ricciardo and Max Verstappen back from third and fourth in the morning session to fifth and sixth in the afternoon.

Vettel was less than one-tenth of a second in front of Bottas, who replaced Nico Rosberg at Mercedes after the reigning world champion retired.

Hamilton, who won back-to-back world championships in 2014 and '15 and narrowly lost to Rosberg last season, completed 22 laps in the morning session and 34 in the afternoon and used three tire compounds across the day. The first practice was almost professional with the Mercedes cars followed by the two Red Bulls and the Ferraris.

Hamilton predicted ahead of the Australian GP that Ferrari would be the team to beat. He said Friday was indicative of how his rivals have improved and said qualifying on Saturday would be the first genuine test. "We knew from FP1 that the Ferraris weren't at their maximum. Of course, in FP2 all of a sudden they were quick," Hamilton said. "We'll see tomorrow how it really stands."

Four-time world champion Vettel completed only 10 laps in the morning session but had 35 in the second session. "We had a mixed day, this morning wasn't so good but then we had a better afternoon," Vettel said. "I think the balance of the car is not yet

where we want it to be, but I'm sure we can take a step forward on that."

Ricciardo and Verstappen, who only ran eight laps in the afternoon, were followed by Carlos Sainz of Toro Rosso, Romain Grosjean - who drove his Haas through the gravel during the second session - and Renault's Nico Hulkenberg.

The new regulations for 2017 allowed for wider tires with more grip and durability, greater aerodynamics, bigger fuel loads and increased downforce and were designed to increase speed. The first two sessions have confirmed that is the case among the top contenders.

Williams rookie Lance Stroll set the first time of the season, the 18-year-old Canadian momentarily on top of the time sheets after his first flying lap in an F1 Grand Prix event. He was 13th in the opening session and dropped to 16th in the second, almost three seconds off the pace. His teammate Felipe Massa was seventh-quickest in the morning but slipped to 14th in the afternoon, reporting mechanical problems as he slid off and stopped on the grass at turn 10. Massa completed six laps in the second session, which was staged in sunny, mild conditions and was only 10 minutes old when Jolyon Palmer spun his Renault rear-first into the barrier. — AP

GOLF

JORDAN SPIETH GRINDS OUT 'MUST WIN' OVER IKEDA

AUSTIN: With a big lead on the back nine, Jordan Spieth put the ball in water again. Gulp. This time, there was no collapse, just a grind-it-out "must win" to beat Japan's Yuta Ikeda in Thursday's second round at the Dell Technologies Match Play in gusty wind that lived up to the legendary tough conditions of Texas golf.

Spieth beat Ikeda 4-and-2 at the Austin Country Club a day after losing his first-round match by the same score to Japan's Hideto Tanihara.

Thursday's victory, coupled with the draw between Tanihara and Ryan Moore, leaves Spieth needing to beat Moore and for Tanihara to draw or lose to Ikeda if Spieth is to move on to today's knockout rounds.

"I've got to play better than I did the last two days and I know that. I've just got to have complete trust because why not at this point. It's a win or go home situation," Spieth said. Beating Ikeda took some work in conditions that saw gusts top 30 mph, often blowing straight in the golfer's faces.

The pair made the turn with Spieth 2-up before he stuck his tee shot to within 18 inches on the par-3 11th and tapped in for birdie to win the hole. But Spieth hit a wild tee shot on No. 13 that plunked into the Colorado River - much wider than Rae's Creek at Augusta - and he peeled out of the shot in disgust.

Instead of seizing the opening for a rally, Ikeda's tee shot splashed as well. They halved the hole and Spieth steadily closed out the match without any mistakes the rest of the way. "We both made a mess of the 13th, but all in all, it was a step in the right direction after yesterday," Spieth said, referring to his opening-round 4-and-2 loss to Tanihara.

As a Texas native, playing in the Lone Star State provides both a comfort zone and an emotional pressure cooker for Spieth. He plays in front of adoring galleries who cheer his big shots and groan over his mistakes. Youngsters plead for autographs or high-fives whenever he's within reaching distance. And the Austin Country Club, where he played several times during his short college career at the University of Texas provides a familiar layout of rolling hills and windy riverside greens.

'CHEERS AT EVERY HOLE'

The pressure of his week also comes from what awaits him in two weeks: a return to the Masters, where he won in 2015 but blew a five-shot lead on the back nine last year in an epic collapse as England's Danny Willett won.

Willett, playing in Spieth's home territory, has had a ragged



AUSTIN: Jordan Spieth of the USA tees off on the 14th hole of his match during round two of the World Golf Championships-Dell Technologies Match Play at the Austin Country Club on Thursday in Austin, Texas. — AFP

tournament with two losses already. A 6-and-5 loss to Bill Haas yesterday eliminated Willett from playing on the weekend.

Before he'd even teed up in Austin, Spieth said he's ready for this year's Masters and the questions about the collapse to be behind him. Then he opened the match play tournament with the loss to Tanihara.

Needing a win Thursday just to give himself a chance to get to the championship rounds, Spieth was greeted with a large crowd at the first tee and "Hook'em Horns!" cheers at every hole. Spieth was 3-up after eight holes as the wind belted the players on every swing.

A bogey on the par-4 10th allowed Ikeda an opening until Spieth's laser tee shot into the 11th put him back in control. "(Conditions) were about as tough as I think I've ever seen it. I couldn't really fall back on much from school," Spieth said. "In match play, you're not upset with these conditions. One-on-one, I think the tougher conditions are better for us. We've kind of always believed that so I kind of hope tomorrow is more of the same." — AP

JOHNSON STAYS PERFECT, MCILROY ELIMINATED

AUSTIN: World number one Dustin Johnson continued his perfect record at the WGC-Dell Match Play on Thursday while number two Rory McIlroy was eliminated without even setting foot on the course.

On an extremely windy afternoon at Austin Country Club with gusts of up to 35 miles per hour (56 kph), Johnson coped manfully with the elements to beat German Martin Kaymer 3&2.

"Putting is the hardest part," Johnson told Golf Channel after improving to 2-0-0 overall with his second straight win over a major champion. "It's very breezy and then really gusty at times."

Despite two wins from two matches, Johnson was not guaranteed of advancing out of the group stage. He must win or halve his match against compatriot Jimmy Walker to be certain of advancing to the final 16. The format divides the 64 players into 16 four-man groups, with the winner of each group entering the knockout stage today.

After losing to Dane Soren Kjeldsen on Wednesday, McIlroy got a win on Thursday when his scheduled opponent Gary Woodland withdrew, citing personal family reasons.

Even with that walkover, however, McIlroy still needed Kjeldsen to lose his second match to have any chance of advancing out of the round-robin group stage.

But Kjeldsen duly shut the door on the Northern Irishman, beating Argentine Emiliano Grillo 4&3 on Thursday to improve to 2-0-0.

Kjeldsen said he relished the tough conditions. "I'm brought up in this," he said. "The way I play golf, I like to shape shots, like to change the trajectory. When I saw it being windy today I was really happy."

Swede Alexander Noren is also guaranteed of being part of the sweet 16, after beating Austrian Bernd Wiesberger 3&2.

McIlroy was not the only highly-ranked player eliminated from the final 16 with world number four Hideki Matsuyama also making an early exit after losing to Englishman Ross Fisher 2&1.

The wind caused all sorts of problems and a watery grave for many a ball, even a shank by American Charles Howell, who had no problem assigning the blame to the conditions.

"(It was) difficult enough to cause a shank," he said after escaping with a 1-up win over Spaniard Rafa Cabrera-Bello.

Phil Mickelson, who improved to 2-0-0 thanks to a 5&4 thumping of fellow American Daniel Berger, said it was fortunate that the match play format was being used rather than stroke play, given the conditions.

"Given the severity of the greens and so forth, certainly there are holes we're going to look ridiculous on," he said after chipping clean across a green into a water hazard. "I think it's fun and it's great for match play because you don't worry about the stroke. It's just relative to your opponent." — Reuters