

Ferrari's budding talent Leclerc promises to shut out the hype

SHANGHAI: Fast-rising Ferrari star Charles Leclerc said yesterday that he must shut out the growing hype surrounding him if he is to win his maiden Formula One race. The 21-year-old from Monaco goes into the Chinese Grand Prix on Sunday — the 1,000th world championship race — widely touted as the next big thing to grace the sport.

He came an agonizing third last time out, in Bahrain, after leading for much of the race until his Ferrari lost power, allowing Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton to snatch victory. Speaking in Shanghai, the third race of the season, Leclerc conceded that getting himself on the podium for the first time had propelled him into the spotlight.

"After the first race (Australia, where he was fifth) nobody sees me as a title contender," he said. "After the second race, everyone sees me as a title contender so things can go (change) very quick in Formula One. "I need to keep the focus on what I'm doing in the car, work as hard as possible and try to do the best job in the car and outside the car, and I'm pretty sure the results will come."

Leclerc, in only his second season in F1 and first with the famed Ferrari team, added: "The win was very close (in Bahrain) and hopefully I'll get my first win soon. "That's the target and that's what I'm working for." Leclerc trumped his Ferrari team-mate and four-time world cham-

pion Sebastian Vettel in Bahrain, with the German coming fifth and alarmingly off the pace.

Leclerc smiled when it was put to him by reporters that he was on the brink of becoming a sporting household name. "The people seeing your face on the podium changes quite a bit," he said, adding that he was now getting widely recognized back home in Monaco. "Formula One is one of the sports in which you don't actually see the face of the athletes until you go to the podium (because of their helmets) or do something good. "That did not happen before two weeks ago, so people put a bit more of the face to the name, which is nice to see, it's good."

Vettel under pressure

The upbeat atmosphere surrounding Leclerc is in stark contrast to that of Vettel. The 31-year-old has made a series of unforced errors stretching back to last season and there have been growing questions about his driving and temperament. Vettel cut a relaxed figure however ahead of practice in Shanghai on Friday, when Ferrari will look to show off their unrivalled straight-line speed.

Vettel, who struggled with the balance of his Ferrari in coming fourth in the season-opening race in Melbourne, admitted that he was still not entirely at home in the car. But he accused his critics of rushing to judgment with the season



SHANGHAI: Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc is pictured in the paddock ahead of the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix. — AFP

still in its very early stages. "I know that I can do better and I know that we have a lot of races to show and prove that," said the German. "Also I

know and understand that nowadays people's judgments don't go further than a week, forward or backward, so it's part of the life." —AFP

Japan names new Olympics minister

TOKYO: Japan yesterday appointed a new Olympics minister to replace a gaffe-prone politician forced to step down after the latest in a string of embarrassing missteps. With less than 500 days to go until the opening ceremony, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told reporters he had re-appointed the "experienced" Shunichi Suzuki, who had already served as Olympics minister between 2017-2018.

"I hope Mr Suzuki... will recover trust (among the public) and lead us towards a successful Olympic and Paralympic Games," Abe told reporters. Suzuki's appointment came after his predecessor Yoshitaka Sakurada quit late Wednesday after comments seen as disrespectful to survivors of the 2011 tsunami. He reportedly told a political gathering that securing the reelection of a local lawmaker was more important than recovery in the area hit by the quake-triggered tsunami and nuclear meltdown that claimed more than 18,000 lives.

More than 50,000 people have not returned to their home towns following the disaster, and Japan has dubbed the 2020 Games the "Reconstruction Olympics" in a bid to showcase recovery in affected regions. "We regret the news that in the midst of accelerating preparations and with less than 500 days to go until the Tokyo 2020 Games, the minister responsible for the Games has resigned," Tokyo 2020 organizers said in a statement.

"Contribution to the reconstruction effort of disaster-hit areas is a main focus of Tokyo 2020, and we will continue our efforts to prepare for the Tokyo 2020 Games... with the key aim of helping to re-strengthen those areas," added organizers. Suzuki yesterday said Sakurada's comments were "inappro-

priate" and vowed to push forward with the reconstruction of disaster-hit areas.

'Does not use computers'

Sakurada's comments were the latest in a series of controversial statements that raised questions about his suitability to steer the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. He also held the cybersecurity portfolio and became a laughing stock after he admitted he "does not use computers." In February, he was forced to apologize after suggesting that the leukaemia diagnosis of star Japanese swimmer Rikako Ikee could dampen enthusiasm for the Games.

The shock announcement of 18-year-old Ikee's diagnosis had prompted an outpouring of support in Japan, but Sakurada came under fire after responding to the news by saying: "She is a potential gold medalist... I'm really disappointed." "When one person leads, she can boost the whole team. I am slightly worried that this type of excitement could wane," he said.

After a backlash, he sought to clarify his stance and admitted his comments had "lacked consideration." Sakurada's resignation also came only a month after the head of Japan's Olympic Committee Tsunekazu Takeda announced he would step down from his position in June. Takeda is the subject of French investigations involving payments made before Tokyo was awarded the 2020 Summer Games.

He also stepped down from the International Olympic Committee, after French authorities said they believed they had evidence of corruption in the awarding of the 2020 Games. Takeda has denied any wrongdoing and said his decision to quit was related to a desire to pass the role on to a younger generation. Japanese politicians are no strangers to foot-in-mouth gaffes. In 2013, now finance minister Taro Aso said Japan's elderly should be allowed to "hurry up and die" instead of being kept alive and costing the government money for end-of-life medical care. And in 2017, he was forced to retract comments in which he cited Adolf Hitler in a bizarre reference about leaving a legacy in politics.—AFP

Hamilton focused only on winning 1,000th race

SHANGHAI: Lewis Hamilton sounded a warning ahead of the 1,000th grand prix on Sunday, saying he was focused only on victory, adding: "I'm not one for special days like this." The Mercedes star from Britain is facing multiple challenges this season, primarily from Ferrari, who go into the third race of the season with the fastest car. But that did not stop the 34-year-old winning in Bahrain two weeks ago after the Ferrari of Charles Leclerc lost power towards the end.

Hamilton, a five-time world champion, was dismissive Thursday of the party atmosphere surrounding this weekend's milestone Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai. "I'm not one for birthdays, I'm not one for anniversaries, I'm not one for special days like this," said Hamilton, who is a point behind his Mercedes team-mate Valtteri Bottas at the top of the early drivers' standings. "It's absolutely no different to any other race weekend for me. I'm here to do one job, and one job only, and that's win. "It

does not matter if it's the 1,000th, 2,000th or 10,000th (race), it's an irrelevant figure for me."

That steely resolve looks set to be put to the test this weekend in Shanghai, where the Briton has triumphed five times and is a crowd favorite. Shanghai has one of the longest straights in Formula One, which will suit Ferrari's searing pace. Hamilton does not expect his Mercedes team to have closed the gap in that department, and sees the Red Bull team as a serious threat too. Cautioning however that the season is in its infancy, Hamilton said that he hopes to beat the Ferraris of Leclerc and Sebastian Vettel fair and square, rather than hope they suffer some kind of mechanical problem.

"I hope that we do not have to rely on reliability and hope that we have a much closer race," he said. "Qualifying was ok in the last race, but the race was a big delta (to the Ferrari speed). "I hope this weekend is closer between us because this is a great track to have a real race. "The closer it is, the better." —AFP