

Sports

Verstappen aims to revive title bid as Hamilton eyes 100th win

'It's a good place to re-set our championship fight'

SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS: Max Verstappen will seek to exert a degree of home advantage by beating Lewis Hamilton to revive his title bid as Formula One returns from a mid-season summer break at the Belgian Grand Prix.

The Belgium-born Dutchman saw a comfortable 33-point lead turned into an eight-point deficit at the British and Hungarian Grands Prix last month before the annual shutdown. He knows he needs to bounce back strongly in the next two events in front of his fervent 'orange army' of fans.

After the controversies of Silverstone and Budapest, the 23-year-old Hasselt-born Red Bull driver also needs an uneventful contest to regain consistency following opening lap collisions in his last two outings. "I am excited to go back to Spa," he said. "It's my favourite track and it's really cool to drive with so many high-speed corners and elevation changes."

"It's a good place to re-set our championship fight and I am well prepared and feeling good ahead of this race weekend. I'm looking forward to seeing all the fans and all the orange in the grandstands!" Verstappen will need a change of luck, too, as he has not won at the sweeping and majestic circuit set in the Ardennes forests and has never finished higher than third.

Seven-time world champion Hamilton has triumphed four times including last year. This weekend, Hamilton will again be seeking to claim a landmark 100th career victory and his fifth this year as Mercedes bid to resist Red Bull's challenge for their titles.

For both men, it will be another torrid test of temperament as well as power and speed as they go immediately from Belgium to Verstappen's other home event, the return of the Dutch Grand Prix

at Zandvoort, the following weekend and then, without a break, to Monza for the Italian Grand Prix.

Attendance at Spa-Francorchamps is set to be capped at 75,000 per day due to the Covid-19 pandemic with most fans expecting more of the spectacular and competitive racing that was seen in Britain in Hungary, leading to a war of words between the Mercedes and Red Bull teams.

"We are in a good position, leading both championships and our car is in a better place thanks to the recent upgrades," said Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff. "But we are expecting a very tough weekend." Asked about the heated rivalry with Red Bull and team boss Christian Horner, Wolff said he and Mercedes had tried to keep things calm, but suggested it was not that way for Red Bull.

"In the war of words, we have tried to maintain our cool, stay level-headed and not fuel controversy and polarisation among our fans. "Our aim was always to de-escalate, but unfortunately the opposite happens on the other side." He stressed that the animosity came from clashes between individuals and that the two teams retained respect for each other. "There is always respect for these organisations and for the people in them," he said.

Both Mercedes and Red Bull could face strong competition this weekend from Ferrari and McLaren as the second half of the season begins in earnest. McLaren's Daniel Ricciardo will start his 200th Grand Prix at the spectacular and high-speed circuit, where 30 years ago seven-time champion Michael Schumacher, later to become a Ferrari legend, made his F1 debut with Jordan. —AFP



FRANCORCHAMPS: Red Bull's Netherlands' driver Max Verstappen walks to the Paddock during previews ahead of the F1 2021 Belgian Grand Prix at Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps yesterday. —AFP

Alonso extends Alpine deal

PARIS: Fresh from their first win in Hungary, Alpine yesterday confirmed Fernando Alonso as Esteban Ocon's teammate for the 2022 season. Two-time world champion Alonso's race craft in holding up a charging Lewis Hamilton in Hungary helped Ocon to a remarkable debut Grand Prix triumph last month.

On the back of that the partnership remains intact for a second season after Ocon signed a three-year deal earlier in the season. "Fernando's excellent teamwork, unparalleled experience and race craft will be strong foundations for Alpine F1 Team's continued progress," the team noted in a statement. Alpine are counting on the veteran 40-year-old Spaniard's expertise to help it through the transition to the new set of regulations due to come into force from next year. Alpine highlighted Alonso's "pivotal" role in securing the rebranded Renault team their first success in their new colours with his fourth place finish, his best result since 2014.

"Further still, Fernando put in a stunning demonstration of overtaking acumen in the race restart to the Azerbaijan Grand Prix, with a similarly skilful performance repeated just a month later in Formula 1's first ever Sprint Qualifying in Silverstone," the team added. Their driver line-up offers a perfect blend of 24-year-old Ocon's youth and Alonso's experience, Alpine added ahead of this weekend's Belgian Grand Prix. Alpine arrive at the Spa-Francorchamps circuit with Ocon in 10th in the drivers classification, one place above Alonso, and the team fifth in the constructors standings. "I felt at home the moment I returned to this team and have been welcomed back with open arms," said Alonso, who won his two world titles in 2005 and 2006 for the team in its Renault era.

"I am looking forward to the rest of this year and racing alongside Esteban in 2022 for Alpine," he added. — AFP

Defeated Pacquiao says open to rematch with Ugas

LOS ANGELES: Manny Pacquiao has refused to rule out a rematch with WBA champion Yordenis Ugas following his upset defeat to the Cuban last weekend, which nudged the Filipino boxing star ever closer to retirement. Pacquiao, 42, told The Athletic website that he may consider fighting Ugas again in January following his unanimous decision loss to the 35-year-old in Las Vegas on Saturday.

"Yes, I can come back in January. I will see about it," Pacquiao told the website. "I know I can rematch him if I want. I'll just need to tell (promoter) Al Haymon. That would be no problem." Ugas said in the aftermath of his win on Saturday, where he clinically picked off Pacquiao from long range to score a deserved victory, that he would be willing to offer the eight-division world champion a rematch.

Pacquiao—who is mulling a bid for the presidency of the Philippines—said on Saturday he might not fight again after the eighth loss of his glittering 26-year professional career. However, he told The Athletic he could be tempted by a second Ugas fight, admitting he was still baffled by the nature of last weekend's loss.

"I will think about it because I can't believe that one



Manny Pacquiao

of the easiest opponents I ever faced did that," said Pacquiao, who has blamed cramping in his legs for his leaden-footed performance. "He shouldn't have touched me. When I moved here (to the right), I had nothing. You know how I move. You've seen it so many times."

"(Ugas) only had one style, and I should've been able to easily move away—you've seen how I have moved in my fights before. I couldn't move in this fight. My legs just stopped." — AFP