



**MANAMA:** Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton (right) speaks with McLaren Honda's Spanish driver Fernando Alonso (center) and Force India's Mexican driver Sergio Perez (left) during a practice session as part of the Formula One Bahrain Grand Prix, at the Sakhir circuit in the desert south of the Bahraini capital, Manama. —AFP

## REVAMPED F1 ALREADY LIVING UP TO ITS HYPE

**SAKHIR:** A pair of multiple world champions level on points, Mercedes and Ferrari neck-and-neck. This season's revamped Formula One is already living up to the hype. Lewis Hamilton and Sebastian Vettel have won a race each so far, and will continue what looks set to be a gripping title race at this weekend's Bahrain Grand Prix. Both like this track and, with evenly matched cars, will be expecting another victory.

Hamilton won in Bahrain in 2014 and 2015, on his way to his second and third world titles with Mercedes. Vettel, then with Red Bull but now with Ferrari, won in 2012 and 2013 during a glittering run of four straight world titles. Vettel has one more title than Hamilton, who has 54 race wins compared to 43 for the younger Vettel. There is little to separate them and they are clearly relishing the battle. Hamilton's title fights over the last three years were within his own Mercedes team, twice beating Rosberg to the title - once easily and once in the last race of the season - only to lose it to the German driver last year.

That loss to Rosberg in the final race of last season in Abu Dhabi still bothers Hamilton, evident in the way he has publicly expressed how much he enjoys racing against Vettel - another way of saying he considers him a significantly better driver than Rosberg was. "The respect for one another is the highest that I have felt from another

driver, especially of his caliber," Hamilton said of Vettel. "It's amazing sportsmanship. When you win you enjoy it, and you also acknowledge the person next door. And even when you lose it's the same thing. We're both doing that, and that's a great place to be. "He's performing at his best, he is rapid out there, so when I'm able to get ahead, it only compliments you, and vice versa."

After winning last weekend's Chinese GP, where Vettel finished second, Hamilton drove up alongside Vettel's car and gave him a thumbs up. Such an overtly friendly gesture of sportsmanship and such gushing praise of a direct rival would never have happened with Rosberg, who stunned F1 by announcing his retirement days after securing his only title and thus depriving the fiercely driven Hamilton a chance to get his own back. When he talks up Vettel in the way he does, Hamilton is also reminding Rosberg of what he will never achieve.

"I'm fighting against a four-time world champion. He is at his best and he is phenomenally quick. And Ferrari are at their best in years, in a decade, pretty much," Hamilton said. "The ultimate fighter always wants to go up against the best battle that he can have, because then when you come out on top, it's just so much more satisfying." How long the mutual admiration will last remains to be seen. Sunday's race promises to be an

intriguing one. With major rule changes increasing the speed of the cars and revving up the noise level, fans are already enjoying much more value for money than in previous seasons. On top of that, they now have a new major rivalry brewing.

Hamilton has both pole positions so far this season, but lost the season-opening Australian GP to Vettel, who earned his first Ferrari win since the 2015 season. Pole is not as crucial in Bahrain as in other races, but a good start is. Last year, Hamilton secured pole in Bahrain but Rosberg won after getting away quickly. The dash to the first corner is 400 meters and flat out fast, and braking at the right time heading into it will be crucial. With very hot temperatures expected, there is little chance of drivers experiencing the same hazardous weather conditions that played havoc in the first two practice sessions in China last weekend.

As well as the tussle between Hamilton and Vettel, eyes will be on teenager Max Verstappen after his astonishing drive in Shanghai. The 19-year-old Dutchman finished third after carving his way through the field from 16th on the grid. The way he overtook nine drivers on the very first lap showed the astonishing ability that makes Verstappen the sport's rising star. If only Red Bull could up its speed, he could be a serious championship rival to Hamilton and Vettel this season.—AP

## ALONSO'S INDY MOVE 'ALSO A CONSEQUENCE OF FAILURE'

**MANAMA:** McLaren's decision to let Fernando Alonso miss the Monaco Grand Prix and race in the Indianapolis 500 is an extraordinary step that, while triggering a rush of excitement, is also a reflection of the team's current predicament. If the unthinkable has become possible, it is because the team are so far off the pace in Formula One. The double world champion said as much in a conference call on Wednesday after McLaren broke the news ahead of Sunday's Bahrain Grand Prix.

"To be honest, if we were fighting for a world championship, we cannot afford to lose a 25 points possibility," said the Spaniard. "Yet we are not in that position, unfortunately." McLaren, the second most successful team after Ferrari in the history of Formula One in terms of wins and titles, have not won a race since 2012 and look a long way off doing so. They are last in the current standings after two races without points and their once-great partnership with Honda, revived in 2015, has been beset by unreliability and a lack of engine power.

Monaco is the slowest race on the calendar but also the most glamorous and one that packs in the sponsors. It is unheard of in modern times for a top driver to miss it of his own volition or for a team to let him. McLaren do have 2009 champion and former Monaco winner Jenson Button as a potential stand-in, however, even if nothing has been confirmed, with the Briton technically only on sabbatical. No team has won Monaco more than McLaren and Alonso's race switch would have been inconceivable under former boss Ron Dennis, who said last May that "what always tops everything for me is Monaco."

The team have a different hue now, however, under American executive director Zak Brown while the sport has new American owners in Liberty Media with plans to expand in the United States. Alonso still ranks, despite his struggles with a recalcitrant car, as one of the top three drivers but his patience is finite and he is out of contract at the end of the year. There has long been speculation that he could walk away early from McLaren but an entry in the most high-profile single-seater race in North America, in a much more competitive car, might tilt the balance.

### Win/Win

"This is a win/win situation for McLaren as a team, the partnership McLaren/Honda .. and for me also a great opportunity to experience this race," Alonso said. "It's good also for the sport ... for the Indy its good news, for Formula One its good news." Only one driver has ever won the Formula One championship, the Indy 500 and Le Mans-Damon Hill's late father Graham- and, with his dreams of a third F1 title fading, Alonso has begun to focus on that. —Reuters

## MIDDLESEX OPPOSE NEW ENGLISH TWENTY20 EVENT

**LONDON:** Middlesex have become the first English county to voice their outright opposition to existing plans for a new domestic Twenty20 tournament. The eight-team event, which the England and Wales Cricket Board plan to launch in 2020 - not a marketing trick but rather the year after their existing broadcast deals expire-has already proved highly controversial. That's because, if it becomes a reality, it will mean that for the first time there is a major domestic cricket tournament in England that does not feature all 18 first-class counties.

For critics, that's the thin end of a wedge that leads to the destruction of the nationwide county system that has underpinned English cricket for more than a century. But supporters of the new event, having seen the success of the Indian Premier League and especially Australia's Big Bash Twenty20 tournaments, believe the English game needs something similar if it is to recapture a 'lost' generation of younger fans. The ECB needs 31 of its 41 constituent members, including the 18 first-class counties, to support a rule change that will allow it to proceed with an eight team, city-based, event. Several clubs have already given their approval, with the ECB promising counties will receive £1.3 million (\$1.6 million, 1.5 million euros) annually for five years if the tournament comes into being.

But if the new tournament gets the go-ahead, Middlesex could miss out on additional revenue as they do not own their Lord's home ground in north London but are tenants instead of Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC). A statement on Middlesex's website confirmed the reigning first-class county champions' opposition to the proposed ECB rule change, with the vote on whether to alter the existing regulations now in progress. —AFP