

FRUSTRATED MERCEDES LOSE GRIP AS 'STRESSFUL' SEASON LOOMS

MELBOURNE: Mercedes' three-year domination of Formula One looked on shaky ground yesterday as the Silver Arrows' confidence was rocked by Ferrari pace and a Sebastian Vettel victory in the season-opening Australian Grand Prix.

Bookmakers had pole-sitter Lewis Hamilton as a heavy favourite to win at Albert Park but the Briton finished runner-up, nearly 10 seconds behind Vettel after complaining of poor grip on the lakeside

circuit. Hamilton's frustrations were shared in the team garage where Mercedes motorsport head Toto Wolff pounded his fist on a desk in rage after Vettel snuck in front of the Briton when re-joining the race from a pit-stop.

The German then burned away for a dominant win that has raised hopes of a genuine challenge to the Mercedes team that has swept the drivers' and constructors' championships for the last three years

running. Three-times champion Hamilton had declared Ferrari the "quickest" after winter testing and his forecast of a title fight with the Italian glamour team appeared right on the mark.

"I don't lie. And I'm not really good at bluffing or playing poker," he said.

"I didn't know how quick they were going to be in the race. The pace they showed in testing was true and today their speed in that first stint on ultra soft tyres

was fantastic. "My real strength wasn't until right at the end of the race but it was far too late by then."

Wolff was also convinced Ferrari had the quicker car and saw testing times ahead for a team that has largely raced itself for three years.

"Some you win, some you lose and today the Ferrari was the quicker car. And it put us under pressure straight from the beginning, and that's how we lost it," said

the Austrian. "It's going to be very close, there's no big margins between the teams and also between our two team mates. It's going to be a more stressful season than in the past but personality-building."

Valtteri Bottas, who took champion Nico Rosberg's vacant seat following the German's shock retirement last season, was third on his Mercedes debut but the focused Finn was hardly jumping for joy.—Reuters

NHL

OVECHKIN, WINNIK LEAD CAPITALS OVER COYOTES

WASHINGTON: Alex Ovechkin recorded his 30th goal of the season and Daniel Winnik scored two goals, including the game-winner late in the third period, as the Washington Capitals overcame listless stretches to beat the lowly Arizona Coyotes 4-1 on Saturday night. Ovechkin became the third player in league history to score 30-plus goals in each of his first 12 seasons, joining Mike Gartner (15) and Wayne Gretzky (13). Winnik scored with 4:39 remaining, Justin Williams added another goal not long after and Winnik sealed the Capitals' fourth consecutive victory with an empty-netter. Braden Holtby made 28 saves for Washington, which has won five of six to reach an NHL-leading 106 points and keep pace atop the competitive Metropolitan Division. The Capitals are three points up on the Columbus Blue Jackets and Pittsburgh Penguins. Mike Smith stopped 29 of the 32 shots he faced and Peter Holland scored the lone goal for Arizona.

OILERS 4, AVALANCHE 1

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Drake Caggiula each had a goal and an assist and the Edmonton Oilers moved into a three-way tie atop the Pacific Division with a victory over the Colorado Avalanche. Benoit Pouliot and Leon Draisaitl also scored for the Oilers, who have won six of their last seven games and are now tied with San Jose and Anaheim at 91 points. Sven Andrighetto scored for the Avalanche, who have dropped five games in a row. Edmonton took a 1-0 lead on its first shot 1:54 into the opening period when Pouliot tipped Matt Benning's point shot past goalie Calvin Pickard.

BRUINS 2, ISLANDERS 1

Riley Nash scored twice and backup goalie Anton Khudobin made 18 saves as the Boston Bruins beat the New York Islanders, snapping a four-game losing streak. Nash broke a 1-1 tie with his second goal of the contest at 4:12 of the third period, beating Islanders goalie Thomas Greiss from the slot for his seventh goal of the season. Dominic Moore assisted on the decisive goal, which lifted Boston two points ahead of the Islanders for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference. John Tavares scored for New York and Greiss finished with 16 saves. Tavares had a golden chance to tie the score with just over six minutes left in the third period, but rang the puck off the crossbar with the Islanders on their sixth power play of the game.

CANADIENS 3, SENATORS 1

Andrei Markov scored two goals and set up another as the Montreal Canadiens beat the Ottawa Senators to retain first place in the Atlantic Division. Shea Weber also scored for Montreal, which leads Ottawa by three points, although the Senators have a game in hand. Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored for Ottawa, which had won two straight. Montreal swept three games in an eight-day span from the Senators and is 3-1-1 against its closest rival this season. Carey Price stopped 31 shots for Montreal, and Craig Anderson had 21 saves for Ottawa.

PANTHERS 7, BLACKHAWKS 0

Jonathan Marchessault scored his first career hat trick while James Reimer stopped 25 shots for his first shutout of the season to help the Florida Panthers rout the Chicago Blackhawks. Jonathan Huberdeau had a goal and three assists, and Aleksander Barkov added a goal and two assists for Florida. Reilly Smith and Nick Bjugstad also scored to give the Panthers their largest margin of victory since an 8-0 win over Toronto on Feb. 5, 2008. Marchessault had two goals in a 3-1 win over Arizona on Thursday. He has nine goals over his last nine games and leads the Panthers with 28. Corey Crawford stopped 21 shots for the Blackhawks before being lifted at 4:59 of the third for Scott Darling, who allowed three goals on six shots.

SABRES 5, MAPLE LEAFS 2

Jack Eichel scored twice and set up another goal in the Buffalo Sabres' win that slowed the youth-laden Toronto Maple Leafs' late-season surge to clinch a playoff berth. Ryan O'Reilly and Dmitry Kulikov each had a goal and an assist, and Evander Kane also scored in a game the Sabres took control of by scoring three successive goals in the second period. Robin Lehner stopped 32 shots, and the Sabres continued their home dominance over their cross-border

rivals by improving to 18-2-1 against Toronto in their last 21 games at Buffalo. Auston Matthews scored his 34th to tie Toronto's single-season rookie record set by Wendel Clark in 1985-86. Connor Brown also scored for Toronto.

BLUE JACKETS 1, FLYERS 0

Sergei Bobrovsky made 36 saves in his seventh shutout of the season, helping the Columbus Blue Jackets beat the Philadelphia Flyers. Bobrovsky was terrific in his NHL-leading 40th win, and Alexander Wennberg tipped in the game's only goal in the second period. The gritty victory in front of a sellout crowd broke a two-game losing streak for the playoff-bound Blue Jackets. The Flyers (34-32-8), trying to muscle their way back into the wild-card race, created more opportunities and outshot Columbus 36-21. Michal Neuvirth made 20 stops.

HURRICANES 3, DEVILS 1

Jeff Skinner scored the go-ahead goal on a breakaway with 10:26 left and the surging Carolina Hurricanes stretched their point streak to 10 games with a victory that eliminated the New Jersey Devils from playoff contention for the fifth straight year. Sebastian Aho scored twice and Eddie Lack made 26 saves for the Hurricanes, who are 7-0-3 in their last 10. They remained five points out of a playoff spot with nine games to go in the regular season. Travis Zajac scored for the Devils, who have not made the postseason since going to the Stanley Cup final in the 2011-12 season. Cory Schneider stopped 25 shots for New Jersey, which is 2-12-2 in its last 16 games.

FLAMES 3, BLUES 2, OT

Sean Monahan scored with 3 seconds left in overtime, lifting the Calgary Flames past the St. Louis Blues. Troy Brouwer and Matt Bartkowski also scored for the Flames, who improved to 13-4 in overtime this season. Brian Elliott made 29 saves. Ivan Barbashev and Jaden Schwartz scored for the Blues, and Jake Allen made 28 saves. Monahan's winning goal deflected off Blues forward Kyle Brodziak. It was his third goal in his past four games.

CANUCKS 4, WILD 2

Reid Boucher scored twice in Vancouver's four-goal second period and the Canucks defeated the slumping Minnesota Wild. Brock Boeser and Jack Skille also scored for Vancouver, while Richard Bachman stopped 25 shots in just his third start of the season. Ryan Suter and Eric Staal scored for Minnesota late in the third period and Darcy Kuemper made 17 saves in his first start since March 12. The Wild have lost seven of their last eight and are now 3-10-0 in March.

PREDATORS 7, SHARKS 2

Colton Sissons and James Neal both scored twice to lead the Nashville Predators over the staggering San Jose Sharks. Cody McLeod, P.K. Subban and Viktor Arvidsson also scored for Nashville, which has won three straight and six of seven. Craig Smith and Colin Wilson had three assists apiece to help the Predators move a point ahead of St. Louis for third place in the Central Division. Patrick Marleau and Justin Braun scored for the Sharks, losers of six straight. They remained tied with Anaheim atop the Pacific Division. San Jose allowed six goals against in Friday night's loss at Dallas.

RANGERS 3, KINGS 0

Derek Stepan scored late in the second period and Antti Raanta made 30 saves for his eighth career shutout as the New York Rangers defeated the Los Angeles Kings. Ryan McDonagh added a power-play goal and Rick Nash scored an empty-netter for the Rangers, who have won eight of their last 10 road games. Jonathan Quick made 17 saves for the Kings, who dropped nine points behind St. Louis for the second wild card in the Western Conference with eight games to play. Raanta was sharp in his last start before Henrik Lundqvist is set to return from a hip injury, denying Tyler Toffoli and Jonny Brodzinski on breakaways and stuffing Drew Doughty late in the third. Raanta earned his fourth shutout of the season, two more than Lundqvist has in 2016-17. McDonagh scored four seconds into a double minor against Andy Andreoff for high-sticking, putting a long shot through Quick's legs.—AP



MELBOURNE: Ferrari's German driver Sebastian Vettel (C) celebrates on the podium with Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton (L) and Mercedes' Finnish driver Valtteri Bottas (R) after winning the Formula One Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne yesterday. — AFP

MOTOR RACING

VETTEL BREAKS FERRARI'S F1 DROUGHT WITH WIN AT AUSSIE GP

MELBOURNE: Sebastian Vettel jumped onto the podium at the Australian Grand Prix and held up his right index finger, celebrating the end of Ferrari's Formula One drought and a break in the Mercedes dominance.

It was back to No. 1 for Ferrari, at least after one race to open the season. Ferrari hadn't won an F1 GP since Vettel's victory in Singapore in September 2015, and so his unrestrained joy yesterday signaled renewed confidence from him. "For now, we're just over the moon," four-time world champion Vettel said after holding off Mercedes teammates Lewis Hamilton and Valtteri Bottas. "It's been a great day for us. The team has been working so hard at the track as much as back at the factory. It's a great feeling."

"Grazie mille," he added, a nod to the Italian manufacturer, "you can't say much more." With regulations designed to make the 2017 F1 cars faster - wider tires, greater aerodynamics, bigger fuel loads and increased downforce - Vettel proved Ferrari's extra pace in pre-season testing was genuine.

"It's good to know we have a great car but it's just the beginning ... with new regulations, a new generation of cars," Vettel said. "Mercedes have a great engine and a great car the last couple of years - we're the ones who've had to catch up. Whatever happens this year, the race today doesn't hurt."

Vettel finished in 1 hour, 24 minutes and 11.672 seconds, almost 10 seconds clear of Hamilton, to give Ferrari its first win in Australia since Kimi Raikkonen took the title in 2007. Raikkonen, in the second Ferrari, finished fourth this year.

IT'S A CHALLENGE

For the second year running, Hamilton started on pole position at the Albert Park circuit and placed second. Last year, he lost to then Mercedes teammate Nico Rosberg, who went on to edge him for the world championship before retiring. This time, Vettel took the lead when Hamilton pitted for new tires on lap 18 and then got stuck in traffic behind Red Bull driver Max Verstappen.

Vettel was able to pit much later and gradually build up his lead as Hamilton drove conservatively on older tires to ensure he finished the race. "That's motor racing," Hamilton said of the hold-up, adding it was his decision to pit and change tires. "A big congratulations to Sebastian and Ferrari."

"This shows we've got a real race on our hands this season and it's a challenge we will relish. It's going to be great for the fans." Mercedes won 19 of the 21 GPs last season, and Red Bull won the other two. But Red Bull was well off the pace in Melbourne, with Verstappen placing fifth - almost 29 seconds behind Vettel - and local hope Daniel Ricciardo failing to finish.

In fact, the Australian driver almost didn't start. Ricciardo's day started badly and kept getting worse as he got a grid penalty, missed the start after a mechanical failure in the warmup, and then retired after 28 laps.

He was among seven drivers who retired during the race. Former champion Fernando Alonso continued to struggle in his McLaren, retiring on the 50th of 57 laps, while 18-year-old Canadian rookie Lance Stroll was handed a grid penalty after needing an unscheduled gearbox change after a crash in practice and was wayward in his 40 laps on debut for Williams.

Felipe Massa earned points for Williams with a sixth-place finish, while Force India teammates Sergio Perez and Esteban Ocon were 7th and 10th in their pink cars and finished either side of Toro Rosso drivers Carlos Sainz and Daniil Kvyat.

Antonio Giovinazzi placed 12th on his F1 debut for Sauber, a late replacement after Pascal Wehrlein withdrew following the opening prac-

tice sessions on Friday.

"I want to thank Sauber and Scuderia Ferrari for this opportunity," Giovinazzi said. "It was an amazing race weekend for me." Ferrari leads the constructors' standings by four points from Mercedes, with Formula One moving to Shanghai next month for the Chinese Grand Prix.

"Overall, I think not a disaster, first race weekend with the team," said Bottas, who joined Mercedes for 2017 as a replacement for Rosberg.

"It's good to start with a podium this season and with a new team. Every position is important for the championship itself."

Hamilton set the lap record with his qualifying run to take pole on Saturday, and there were expectations that the cars would go faster Sunday. But Michael Schumacher's racing lap record from 2004 stood up, with Hamilton predicting the 2017 cars would go faster as the year progressed.—AP

RICCIARDO PLAGUED BY RELIABILITY PROBLEMS

MELBOURNE: A tough week for Red Bull driver Daniel Ricciardo ended in despair yesterday as the home hero came to a stop midway through the Australian Grand Prix with smoke billowing out of his car.

Ricciardo's hopes of a maiden podium at Albert Park were already razor-thin after a crash during qualifying on Saturday, which forced a gearbox change and resulted in a five-place penalty, leaving him 15th on the grid. But even getting to the grid proved beyond his Red Bull, which stopped with a gearbox sensor problem as he lapped the lakeside circuit before the start.

Ricciardo exited the track fuming but was soon lowering himself into the seat again as technicians frantically worked on his car in the garage as the clock ticked down to the start. He eventually joined the race from the pit-lane two laps behind the other cars but lasted just 25 laps before his car finally ground to a terminal halt at turn three with an apparent fuel pressure problem.

It takes a lot to wipe the smile from the affable 27-year-old's face but he cut a grim figure in the garage as he watched the rest of the race, won by Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel.

Having endured an exhausting week of media and sponsor events as his nation's

great hope in motor sport, Ricciardo had little joy from his car during practice and qualifying, and he could not wait to be shot of Melbourne.

"On the plus side, I'm getting out of here," Ricciardo, who initially finished second in Melbourne in 2014 but was later disqualified for a fuel limit infringement, told reporters.

"It's been a long week. Don't get me wrong, it's been fun."

"I feel bad for everyone, for the fans. Obviously I believe there's more people here supporting me than the others and I'm sure they would have loved me to get out there and race. "But it just kind of snowballed from yesterday... Happy to move on." His Dutch team mate Max Verstappen had a better time of it, finishing fifth behind the Ferrari and Mercedes cars.

The teenager, tipped to give Ricciardo headaches this season after challenging him on track last year, said he was surprised his car had the pace to keep close to Ferrari's fourth-placed Kimi Raikkonen.

"I think the car behaved quite a bit better in the race than in qualifying," Verstappen said. "It looked a lot better in the race, I'm very happy about that. We still need to improve and we will work hard to do that." — Reuter



MELBOURNE: Red Bull's Australian driver Daniel Ricciardo reacts in the team garage during the Formula One Australian Grand Prix yesterday. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Daniel Winnik #26 of the Washington Capitals scores an empty net goal in front of Jamie McGinn #88 of the Arizona Coyotes during the third period at Verizon Center on Saturday in Washington, DC. The goal was his second goal of the third period. — AFP