

Sports

'Age doesn't matter': Alonso returns to F1 with Renault 'family'

'As long as you stay fit and motivated and don't decline with age'

SPIELBERG: Two-time world champion Fernando Alonso on Wednesday insisted "age doesn't count" as it was revealed he would make a return to his Renault "family" in 2021 when he will be 39.

Alonso was named as teammate to Esteban Ocon for 2021 at the French team where he won the 2005 and 2006 Formula 1 world titles. The Spaniard, who has notched up 32 wins and 97 podiums in 314 Grand Prix starts, will replace Australian driver Daniel Ricciardo, who is McLaren-bound at the end of this season.

Alonso will be 39 in three weeks' time. However, he is a year younger than fellow former world champion Kimi Raikkonen who is still driving in the championship at 40. "In motor racing, it is not the age that counts, it is the clock," he told AFP.

"There is certainly a movement towards increasingly younger drivers but, at Mercedes for example, it would not be a good thing replacing Lewis Hamilton with a younger driver just because he's 35.

"As long as you stay fit and motivated and don't decline with age, that doesn't matter." New teammate Ocon was just 10 when Alonso won his 2006 world title. Alonso, also a former Ferrari driver, said the French team had given him his "fondest memories" in Formula One.

"Renault is my family," he added. "It's a great source of pride and with an immense emotion

I'm returning to the team that gave me my chance at the start of my career and which now gives me the opportunity to return to the highest level." Alonso left Formula One in 2018 after four fruitless years at McLaren and is due to make a third attempt to win the Indianapolis 500 with McLaren in August. Alonso said he had bought into Renault's project for the coming season.

"Their progress this winter gives credibility to the objectives for the 2022 season and I will share all my racing experience with everyone from the engineers to the mechanics and my team-mates," he said. "The team wants and has the means to get back on the podium, as do I."

Alonso said he felt "joy" at returning to Formula 1. "I feel very privileged to be able to choose my own destiny," he said. "I could always choose to do what I wanted. I wanted to leave F1 to get some fresh air, now I think it's a good time to come back because I feel fresh and I had the opportunity.

"When you can do what you love, what you want is a feeling of joy." Cyril Abiteboul, managing director of Renault Sport Racing said the signing of Alonso was a sign of Renault's "plan to continue its commitment to F1 and to return to the top of the field".

"His presence in our team is a formidable asset on the sporting level but also for the brand to which he is very attached," Abiteboul said. "The strength of the bond between him, the team

Mercedes and Red Bull duel for supremacy

SPIELBERG: Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff may have seen his world champion team claim victory in the season-opening Austrian Grand Prix, but he still insists the "gloves are off" when the duel for supremacy with rivals Red Bull resumes on Sunday.

Valtteri Bottas gave Mercedes a pole-to-flag win at the Red Bull Ring last weekend as the 2020 championship finally roared into life.

However, teammate and world champion Lewis Hamilton was fourth after facing two protests from Red Bull on the eve of the race over his qualifying tactics. Hamilton was relegated from second to fifth on the grid before a late collision with Red Bull's Alex Albon torpedoed his hopes of a podium, despite finishing second on the track.

"We were lucky to finish the race and reliability is a real concern. We are working it as our highest priority," admitted Wolff.

But stung by the daily protests from Red Bull,

he warned rival team chief Christian Horner and his team: "It's serious now. Gloves off. No more nice stuff — we are in a real fight to win.

"So, in a short and intense season like this, with a yet to be determined number of races, every point is going to count."

The second race of the season takes place at the same bio-secure Spielberg circuit nestled in the foothills of the Styrian Alps.

Not surprisingly, this weekend's race has been named in honour of the spectacular mountain range. Having watched from the pit-lane as Bottas claimed his third victory for Mercedes on one of his favourite tracks, Red Bull's Max Verstappen wants better luck this weekend.

The Dutchman, forced to retire early from the Austrian Grand Prix with electrical problems, hopes to live up to Horner's pledge that Red Bull will treat every race "like a cup final" by taking the fight to rivals Mercedes.

"We were a bit down on pace compared to Mercedes in qualifying last time," said Verstappen. "So we definitely need to close the gap to fight them in that area, rather than on strategy.

"I was looking good for a podium, which I thought was easily possible because it was basically between Mercedes and myself on raw pace, but then you should also look at how the whole race panned out.—AFP



SHUBAYTAH: File photo taken on January 15, 2020, shows Toyota's Spanish driver Fernando Alonso drives his car after the suspension of the race due to strong winds during the Stage 10 of the Dakar 2020 between Haradh and Shubaytah, Saudi Arabia. —AFP

and the fans make him a natural choice. In addition to past successes, it is a bold mutual choice as well as a project for the future."

Abiteboul added: "His experience and determination will enable us to get the best out of each other to take the team towards the excellence that modern Formula 1 demands. "He will also bring to our team, which has grown very fast, a culture of racing and winning to overcome

hurdles together. Alongside Esteban, his mission will be to help Renault DP World F1 Team prepare for the 2022 season in the best possible conditions." F1 teams are in Austria preparing for the second race of the season this Sunday after Mercedes driver Valtteri Bottas took the chequered flag in the opening race of the coronavirus-delayed season, also in Austria, last weekend. —AFP

Chinese footballers get virus-bubble karaoke

SHANGHAI: Chinese Super League footballers holed up in hotels for two months to prevent the spread of coronavirus will be able to pass the time by doing karaoke and playing badminton, an official said Wednesday.

CSL clubs and players have voiced concerns about their mental well-being due to being stuck in a strictly closed environment when the virus-delayed season kicks off on July 25. This year's truncated campaign, which was supposed to start on February 22 before the virus hit, will see the 16 clubs divided into two groups playing in two different cities during the first phase.

Half the teams will be based at a single hotel in Suzhou, near Shanghai, while the others will be confined to a hotel in the northeastern city of Dalian. Players and staff will not be allowed outside the hotel, training ground and stadium, to stop any coronavirus infections spreading.

Referees will be subjected to the same harsh restrictions for at least two months, and matches will be behind closed doors. Asked how the Chinese Football Association will safeguard physical and mental health, secretary-general Liu Yi said: "This is a topic of great concern to the football association, various clubs and the media.

"At the hotel base camps where the clubs will stay we have set up a variety of cultural and recreational activities," he told Xinhua news agency, after the CFA outlined Wednesday the steps it was taking to launch the new season. "That includes reading rooms, swimming pools, badminton courts, karaoke, etc.

"To give you an insight, I just went to Suzhou the day before yesterday to solve the problem of setting up a hairdressing room in the hotel. "We believe that through various means, the players and referees can be balanced and happy."—AFP