

Sports

Hamilton hopes to end frustrating pursuit of 100th win in Russia

SOCHI, Russia: Lewis Hamilton will be seeking to exploit every advantage he can find this weekend as he bids for an unprecedented and thus far elusive 100th Formula One win to regain the lead in the world championship at the Russian Grand Prix. Since grabbing victory in controversial circumstances at the British Grand Prix in July, the seven-time champion has been unable to add to his total of 99 victories and has struggled to reach his century.

But after surviving another spectacular crash with title rival Max Verstappen of Red Bull at Monza, to follow their high-speed first lap tangle at Silverstone, Hamilton has an inviting opportunity to make history for Mercedes at the Sochi Autodrom, on the shores of the Black Sea on Sunday. Not only is he seeking a record fifth triumph in the former Olympic Park but Mercedes are unbeaten in all seven races held there.

Verstappen, meanwhile, goes into the event with a three-place grid penalty for his part in their collision in Italy where his car ended up on top of Hamilton, who escaped injury or worse thanks to the 'halo' cockpit safety device. That all suggests that the 36-year-old Briton has a sumptuous chance to overhaul the Dutchman's five-point advantage in the championship.

Verstappen, at best, can only start fourth if he is fastest in qualifying, but insists he was not to blame for their latest crash. The 23-year-old is also bullish about his bid to take Hamilton's crown. "Of course, the penalty is not ideal, but nothing is lost—that's how I look at it," he said. "In the championship, there are a lot of races ahead and the margin is tiny. We will make the most of it and do our best.

"You can reflect all you want, but it's more important to look forward and keep pushing. I still believe it was a racing incident."

Verstappen finished second behind Hamilton's Mercedes teammate Valtteri Bottas last year and believes he can be highly competitive in what is likely to be a wet racing weekend. "It's completely different to Monza and I'm looking forward to it to see if we can improve on last year."

Hamilton 'laser-focused'

Hamilton is expected to have fully recovered from the headaches and neck pain he suffered in Italy and, according to Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff, is in determined mood. "Lewis is in the tenth championship battle of his F1 career and he is laser-focused on what he needs to deliver in the next eight races," he said, adding that Bottas, who leaves to join Alfa Romeo next year, is driving "better than ever". "There's a calm determination about the team right now and the business end of a season, fighting for championships, is exactly what we enjoy the most."

Mercedes lead Red Bull by 18 points in the constructors' title race with Sochi offering them a chance to extend that advantage while McLaren, who won in Italy thanks to a rousing drive from Daniel Ricciardo, may offer a threat. "I want to build on my Monza performance and will push to score important points," said the Australian. "But Sochi can be a tricky circuit to make a move."

To further complicate matters, it is possible that Verstappen may take a new Honda power unit - and with it another penalty that



SOCHI: Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton addresses the drivers' press conference for the Formula One Russian Grand Prix at the Sochi Autodrom circuit yesterday. — AFP

would drop him to the back of the grid, from where he could mount a charge to finish in the top five. Hamilton also faces the same prospect, but may delay it until a later race. With heavy rain forecast, it will be a weekend filled with jeopardy for teams and drivers as the tension builds again. Another collision remains likely, though Hamilton will this time hope to be beyond reach of the young Dutchman's boldest moves. —AFP

'Postman' Poulter aims to deliver again for Europe

KOHLER: England's Ian Poulter, dubbed "The Postman" for his consistent ability to deliver for Europe, says there's no secret to his Ryder Cup success. "I hate losing," the English veteran said when asked why the biennial match play showdown with the United States brings out his best golf.

"You see the guy when you play match play, you know what you have to do when you tee up on the first hole. You can control a match. You can dictate a match. You can play certain shots to try and put your opponent under pressure. You can't do that in stroke play really unless it comes down to the back nine and the group you're in you're actually clear of the rest of the field."

"It's just a fun game of chess, to be honest, to enjoy what that means, that you're under pressure right from the get-go. It just doesn't happen in stroke play. It's kind of like you plod your way into the tournament, but it's back nine Sunday mentality every single time you tee it up."

Poulter has been a key contributor to Europe's recent dominance. They have won four of the past five editions and Poulter, who made his debut in 2004, has played on five winning sides in six appearances. He says it will take a special effort for Europe to retain the Cup they won in France three years ago against a US side featuring eight of the world's top 10 players and no one ranked lower than 21st.

"It's not easy to play away from home," Poulter said. "As much as we feel comfortable as a team, to know we're underdogs, to know that, we have to play extra special this week to get the job done." Poulter sparked Europe's "Miracle at Medinah" victory in 2012, making birdie at five straight holes to secure a point in the penultimate session as Europe rallied to win. He won two and lost two of four matches at Le Golf National in 2018, but maintained his unbeaten record in singles with a victory over then top-ranked Dustin Johnson.



KOHLER, Wisconsin: Lee Westwood, Ian Poulter, Paul Casey, Tyrrell Hatton, Matthew Fitzpatrick and Tommy Fleetwood of England and team Europe pose for a photo during the Team Europe Gala Dinner prior to the 43rd Ryder Cup at The American Club on Wednesday. —AFP

Lightning rod

It was no surprise when Pdraig Harrington made him a captain's pick for the fifth time. Harrington said Poulter's ability to perform under pressure isn't the only thing that makes him a valuable asset. "You have players who you want to just focus on playing golf," Harrington said. "They're just golfers. They want to concentrate. They want to know what they're doing just like a regular week, and you have other players who want a bit of a hyped up week, and Ian is one who can take that pressure and can deal with it."

"He can take it, handle it, and can be a lightning rod to inspire the team, and also maybe to give the other guys a quiet or an easy run." Poulter's opponents certainly can't expect anything to be easy, and the Englishman has no plans to make it so. "I'm sure I've annoyed plenty," he said. "I mean, my percentage has been really nice, for me, and not for the guys I've played against, so I'm sure that's been pretty frustrating to be on the receiving end of that. It feels nice. I enjoy holing putts and winning matches. It's been a great ride. I'm never going to apologize for it. It's how match play should be played." — AFP

US tries to win back Ryder Cup as Europe seeks upset

KOHLER, Wisconsin: An American squad featuring nine of the world's 11 top-ranked golfers tries to reclaim the Ryder Cup from Europe this weekend, aided by 40,000 loud supporters and a home course edge. The European side, however, has won nine of the past 12 editions of the biennial team matches, including three of the past six on US soil, and brings an experienced lineup to face a US team with six rookies on its 12-man roster.

"Everything is stacked against us," said European talisman Ian Poulter, who has never lost a Ryder Cup singles match. "When you have that, when you can go in as underdogs, when you can turn the tide and actually come out victorious, it means a little bit more. "If we can come out on top Sunday night, it'll be a pretty special one."

Four-time major winner Rory McIlroy of Europe says a win "would be massive" and rival Europe's rally from 10-6 down on Sunday to win the 2012 "Miracle at Medinah." "I'd certainly love to have that feeling again," McIlroy said. "It would be a huge achievement." Brisk winds at Whistling Straits along the Lake Michigan shoreline promise to make the layout, tucked among cliffs and hillsides, formidable for everyone when play starts Friday. "We like a bit of wind, but we're not asking for everybody to be blown off the golf course," Europe captain Pdraig Harrington said.

"You've got to hit wind shots. You've got to keep the ball down at times. You've got to aim off into trouble and trust the wind is going to take it back. Nobody wants it too windy. That's not conducive to a good, fair battle, but a bit of wind is a true test of golf."

Flag-stiffening winds will switch to southerly on Friday, unlike anything seen on practice days. "Wind has proved to be a challenge," US captain Steve Stricker said. "We're going to see something totally different come Friday." US players "had a good time with the wind," Stricker said. "They thought it was fun. They embraced it." —AFP