

Sports

Perez claims 'dream' Monaco win as bungled strategy foils Leclerc

Champion Verstappen book third place

MONACO: Sergio Perez took full advantage of his Red Bull team's superior strategic decisions to resist late pressure from Ferrari's Carlos Sainz and win Sunday's rain-delayed and crash-hit Monaco Grand Prix. In a breathless race, completed under a two-hour timing rule, the 32-year-old Mexican came home 1.1 seconds clear of his Spanish rival with Red Bull team-mate, series leader and world champion Max Verstappen third, a further second adrift.

Local favourite Charles Leclerc finished fourth in the second Ferrari after a confused double pit-stop cost him his position as leader. For the Monegasque driver, there was little consolation in finishing the race for the first time after starting from pole. "I have no words," said a bitterly disappointed Leclerc on team radio. An altogether happier Perez was basking in getting his hands on one of the jewels in the F1 calendar.

"It's a dream come true," he said. "As a driver you dream of winning here. After your home race, there is no other more special weekend to win. It's a massive day for myself and my country." It was Perez's first win of the season, ending the domination of Verstappen and Leclerc, and the third of his career, making him the most successful Mexican F1 driver, moving one clear of Pedro Rodriguez. Verstappen was philosophical with a result that moved him nine points ahead of Leclerc in the drivers' championship.

"I tried the best I could and as a team we did a really good job with the strategy," he said, congratulating Perez on his win. George Russell came home fifth for Mercedes with a well-judged drive ahead of

fellow-Briton Lando Norris of McLaren, two-time champion Fernando Alonso of Alpine and a frustrated Lewis Hamilton, the seven-time champion unable to make passing progress in his Mercedes. Valtteri Bottas finished ninth for Alfa Romeo and four-time champion Sebastian Vettel 10th for Aston Martin.

Vettel's fellow-German Mick Schumacher survived a spectacular crash when his Haas car split in two after hitting the barriers. After an hour's delay due to heavy rain and a sequence of cautious decisions by Race Control, followed by two laps behind the Safety Car, the race finally began with a rolling start. In spite of the tension, Leclerc made a smooth start and led Sainz through Ste Devote and up the hill, followed by the rest in grid order amid plumes of spray.

Luckless Leclerc

Leclerc led by 5.4 seconds after 16 laps with Sainz 2.3 clear of Perez who traded his wet tyres for 'inters' allowing Verstappen to take third, followed by Norris and then on lap 19, Leclerc, who re-joined third 13 seconds behind new leader Sainz and Perez. Ferrari, on lap 21, pitted both Sainz and, unexpectedly, Leclerc in a 'double stack' stop for slicks that left the Monegasque driver in a fury, complaining it had cost him places. In a blur of confused radio messages, Leclerc was called in and then asked to stay out as Ferrari realised that Red Bull were also pitting their men for slicks, but it was too late.

As he ranted, Red Bull pitted and emerged on slicks ahead of their respective Ferrari rivals. By lap 26, Perez led ahead of Sainz and Verstappen, with



MONACO: Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc (right), Ferrari's Spanish driver Carlos Sainz Jr (2nd right), Red Bull Racing's Mexican driver Sergio Perez (2nd left) and Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen (left) compete in the Monaco Formula 1 Grand Prix on May 29, 2022. — AFP

the luckless Leclerc in fourth. Two laps later, the race was halted again when Schumacher lost control and smashed into the barriers in the Swimming Pool complex. His Haas car was severed in two, the gearbox, rear axle and rear wing cut apart, but he emerged unhurt as the Safety Car was deployed again followed by a red flag to allow for the barriers to be repaired.

When the action re-started, behind the Safety Car

on lap 31, Ferrari had switched to used hard dry tyres, and the rest to mediums, for the estimated final 32 laps to the flag as racing resumed in a 'timed' contest. But overtaking proved difficult, if not impossible. With 10 minutes remaining, the top four were separated by two seconds, with Perez hanging on with his worn tyres and Sainz attacking him. Russell remained fifth, eight seconds adrift, but ahead of Norris as the race ended with a two-hour cut off. — AFP

News in brief

All-female rugby officials

LONDON: Scottish referee Hollie Davidson will make history when she leads an all-female team of match officials for the men's international between Portugal and Italy on June 25. Davidson will have England's Sara Cox and France's Aurelie Groizeleau as her assistant referees, with England's Claire Hodnett working as the Television Match Official for the match in Lisbon. It will be the first time an all-female team have taken charge of a men's Test match and the first time a female referee has officiated a men's Six Nations team in a Test. Davidson became Scottish rugby union's first full-time professional women's referee in 2017. She has taken charge of four men's matches in the United Rugby Championship and has also refereed in the European Challenge Cup. "To be the first woman to referee a men's Six Nations team is a tremendous honor and an achievement I am proud of," Davidson said. — AFP

Burns beats Scheffler in playoff

LOS ANGELES: Sam Burns rolled in a 38-foot birdie putt from off the green at the first playoff hole to beat world number one Scottie Scheffler at the Charles Schwab Challenge on Sunday. Burns, seven back to start the day, matched the biggest comeback in tournament history at Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas, a mark set by Zimbabwe's Nick Price in 1994. Burns polished it off with a playoff win over his good friend Scheffler. Burns shared a house with the Texan at Augusta in April, when Scheffler won his maiden major title at the Masters. "Gosh, I don't even know," Burns said of how he made his winning putt, some two hours after he had completed a five-under par 65 final round for a nine-under total of 271. — AFP

Cambage denies racial slur

SYDNEY: Australian basketball star Liz Cambage denied on Monday using racist language towards the Nigerian team during a warm-up game for last summer's Tokyo Olympics. The 30-year-old stalwart of the Australian women's Olympic basketball team, the Opals, pulled out of the Games shortly beforehand, citing a struggle with her mental health fuelled by the thought of "terrifying" isolation in the COVID-19 "bubble". But Australian media at the weekend published footage of what it said was a bad-tempered, closed-door practice match in the United States and said that it was this "five minutes of Las Vegas mayhem that ended Liz Cambage's Opals career". — AFP

Marathon cricket summer

SYDNEY: Cricket Australia unveiled a bumper home fixture list on Monday with eight bilateral men's series against five different opponents either side of their defense of the T20 World Cup. The marathon five-month schedule starting in August will thrust the Australian men's team into at least 27 games in front of home supporters rising to 29 if they reach the T20 World Cup final in Melbourne on November 13. Australia's recently-crowned women's 50-over world champions have a lighter program, staging twin limited-overs series against Pakistan in late January. International cricket will return to Perth for the first time since 2019, with the city's new stadium to host the first of two Tests against the West Indies from November 30 with the second a day-night match in Adelaide. — AFP

Ji defeats Furue to capture LPGA Match-Play crown

LOS ANGELES: South Korean Ji Eun-hee won the LPGA Match-Play tournament on Sunday, defeating Japan's Ayaka Furue 3&2 in the championship match at Shadow Creek in Las Vegas. At 36, Ji became the oldest South Korean winner of an LPGA title, taking her first tour victory since the 2019 Tournament of Champions.

Ji called it the hardest victory of her career. "Very much. It was really hard," she said. "We have to play 36 holes (Saturday and Sunday). That makes it a lot harder. My feet almost not moving last couple holes. My back hurts. Really tired now." Ji, ranked 83rd, claimed her sixth career LPGA triumph and the last berth in next week's US Women's Open. Ji's only major title came at the 2009 US Women's Open.

"Definitely day off tomorrow and then try to work hard again," Ji said. "I hit it pretty well this week. I

was really positive going to play." World number 27 Furue, who turned 22 on Friday, is a seven-time winner on the LPGA Japan Tour who earned her way onto the US LPGA circuit for 2022 at qualifying school. In the morning semi-finals, Ji ousted American Andrea Lee 4&3 while Furue defeated American Lilia Vu 2&1. Vu beat Lee 3&2 in the third-place match, each earning her best LPGA finish.

In the final, Ji won the par-4 third hole with a par, but par putt lip outs at the par-5 fifth and seventh holes handed Furue a 1-up lead. Ji responded by winning the next three holes, taking the par-3 eighth with a five-foot birdie putt after Furue made a sand-save par putt from 12 feet. Ji holed out from the fairway for eagle at the par-5 ninth, her approach landing and rolling two feet ahead into the cup, then sank a six-foot par putt at the 10th to seize a 2-up advantage.

Furue won on Ji's concession at the 11th after finding greenside rough out of a bunker but Furue missed a four-foot par putt to drop the 12th and fall 2-down to Ji once again. Ji's seven-foot par putt at the 14th kept her 2-up while Furue holed a 12-footer to par the 15th and stay 2-down with three holes remaining. At the par-5 16th, Ji needed two shots to escape greenside



LAS VEGAS: Ji Eun-hee of South Korea poses with the champions trophy after defeating Ayaka Furue of Japan 3&2 on May 29, 2022. — AFP

rough but sank a clutch 10-foot par putt while Furue missed a par putt from just inside 10 feet to drop the hole and the match. — AFP

Sweden's Marcus Ericsson wins 106th Indianapolis 500

WASHINGTON: Sweden's Marcus Ericsson won the 106th Indianapolis 500 on Sunday, holding off Mexico's Pato O'Ward in a two-lap shootout after a late red flag halted the race. Chip Ganassi driver Ericsson was leading O'Ward by more than a second when Jimmie Johnson's crash with five laps remaining brought out the red flag in the 200-lap classic at the famed 2.5-mile (4km) Indy oval. "Those 10 minutes sitting there in the pit lane during that red flag was some of the hardest 10 minutes of my life," Ericsson said.

When the green flag waved for full-speed racing with two laps remaining, Ericsson repelled O'Ward's attempt to pass early on the final lap to claim the victory. "Pato had a really good run on me," Ericsson said. "I just kept my foot down and that was the race-winning move. He made me work for it, for sure." Ericsson became the second Swede to win the race after Kenny Brack in 1999. Brazil's Tony Kanaan grabbed third place for Ganassi as teammate Scott Dixon endured another Indy 500 heart-break after starting from pole.

New Zealand veteran Dixon, who won from pole in 2008, led much of the race but was handed a pit lane speed violation penalty on his final pit stop with 23 laps remaining. "Come on! Are you serious?" Dixon could be heard yelling into his radio as he was informed of the violation that sent him to the



INDIANAPOLIS: Marcus Ericsson, driver of the #8 Huski Chocolate Chip Ganassi Racing Honda, leads a pack of cars during the 106th running of the Indianapolis 500 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway on May 29, 2022. — AFP

back of the pack. It marked the fourth time that Dixon—a six-time IndyCar series champion—had started from pole and failed to win the fabled race. He has been runner-up three times.

"It's heartbreaking," Dixon said. "I came into the pit and had to lock the rears and kind of locked all four. I knew it was going to be close. I think it was a mile an hour over or something. Just frustrating. I just messed up." While Ganassi had five cars starting in the first four rows on Sunday, Ericsson wasn't looking like the likeliest team driver to win for most of the day. Dixon and Spanish teammate Alex Palou traded the lead early before a pit lane penalty ended Palou's chances.

Ericsson notched his third career IndyCar victory after winning at Detroit and Nashville last year. He was in control with five laps remaining when US stock car great Johnson, making his Indianapolis 500 debut, hit the wall in turn three, scattering debris across the track. Organizers, not wanting to finish the race under a yellow flag caution, brought out the red flag to bring the drivers into the pits. "I couldn't believe it," Ericsson said. "I was praying so hard it was not going to be another yellow." Even with the restart giving him a chance to pass Ericsson, O'Ward said he simply didn't have the necessary speed. — AFP

Gauff, Stephens in all-American French Open showdown

PARIS: Teenager Coco Gauff will bid to reach her first Grand Slam semi-final on Tuesday at the French Open when she takes on experienced compatriot Sloane Stephens in the last eight. The 18-year-old is playing in her second straight Roland Garros quarter-final after losing to eventual champion Barbora Krejickova 12 months ago. Five different US players have reached the women's quarter-finals in the last five years, but there has not been an American champion since Serena Williams won her third title in 2015. World number one Iga Swiatek is the only top-10 seed left in the draw and is firm favorite for the title.

But Gauff believes that "anybody can win", using last year's US Open—when qualifier Emma Raducanu

beat fellow teenager Leylah Fernandez in the final—as an example. "I know that some of the higher seeds on my side definitely dropped out of the draw," she said. "I'm thinking, especially if US Open taught us anything, anybody can win on any day. I think all players should really (be) going into the match thinking about that." Gauff added: "I think really we just have to take a step back, especially in the Grand Slams, and not look at rankings anymore."

It will be Gauff's second meeting with former US Open champion Stephens, after falling to a straight-sets defeat when they met in an all-American second-round clash at Flushing Meadows last year. "I think last time I played her I was super nervous going into the match," she said. "Not because it was Sloane. Just because we were on (Arthur) Ashe (court) and it was an all-American match-up. I think a lot of people expected a lot from me in that match."

Stephens is hoping to reach the semi-finals of a major event for the first time since losing the 2018 French Open final to Simona Halep. The 29-year-old has slipped from a career-high of world number three



PARIS: US' Coco Gauff returns the ball to Belgium's Elise Mertens during their women's singles match on day eight of the Roland-Garros Open tennis tournament at the Court Philippe-Chatrier. — AFP

to 64th spot in the WTA rankings. But the clay-court tournament is the only Grand Slam where Stephens has made three quarter-finals. — AFP