New rules, same old suspects as F1 revs up for 2026 season

Sweeping regulation changes leave teams guessing ahead of unpredictable Formula One season

- Major rule overhaul introduced
- Four teams remain main contenders
- Mercedes tipped early favourite
- Red Bull engine reliability questioned
- Russell-Verstappen rivalry intensifies
- Season begins in Melbourne


McLaren's British driver Lando Norris drives in the pit on the second day of the Formula One pre-season testing at the Bahrain International Circuit


Red Bull Racing's French driver Isack Hadjar drives on the third day of the Formula One pre-season testing at the Bahrain International Circuit

AFP | Paris

The start of any Formula One season is a game of smoke and mirrors: this one, which gets underway in Melbourne on March 8, has the added intrigue of sweeping changes that could shake up the established order.

For all the pre-season testing, the finger-pointing, the accusations of 'sandbagging' and loopholes in the new regulations, the guessing games have left us nowhere closer to predicting how the 24-race 2026 season will pan out.

Beyond the obvious, of course: the champion will come from one of four teams, the usual suspects of McLaren, Mercedes, Red Bull and Ferrari.

And that is no disrespect to the other seven teams including newcomers Cadillac and Audi.

The major overhaul to chassis and power units, designed to create more overtaking opportunities and improve the sport's eco-sustainability, have dominated the pre-season testing.

So the smoke will only begin to lift on the true force of each car when they take to the track at Albert Park.

Only then will we get an idea of whether McLaren's Lando Norris will be in pole position to retain the world title he won so dramatically from Max Verstappen last season.

The pit lane talk has been hanging the favourite's tag around the neck of George Russell as Mercedes are rumoured to have made the best of the rule changes.

That may depend, however, on whether they have indeed exploited a loophole in the new rules, as many are claiming, which could give them as much as 0.3 seconds per lap over their rivals.

In sport of fine margins, that is a gaping chasm.

When Verstappen grumbled publicly about the new cars in Bahrain, describing them as "Formula E on steroids" and "anti-racing", Russell leapt to their defence.

"The guiding principles are still very much the same," said the Briton.

"You're pushing the car to the absolute limit.

"You're trying to brake as hard as possible and as late as possible, and carry as much speed through the corners."

'Reliable' Red Bull

The Russell-Verstappen dynamic is certainly one to watch.

The pair have had a number of spats going back to the Azerbaijan sprint in 2022. It picked up in 2024 with Russell accusing Verstappen of being a bully and the Dutchman describing Russell as a "backstabber".

For these last four years the Mercedes was not a match on track for Verstappen's Red Bull but if that changes this year then the rivalry could reignite.

Questions remain about the efficiency and reliability of the new Red Bull engine which is the first that the team has developed and built itself, with some input from Ford.

Having said that, the four-time world champion's father Jos Verstappen, who is not renowned for holding back, called it "promising".

"I am satisfied with what is happening, especially when we look at the engine," he said.

"It is powerful and reliable. During the first race, we will see where it really stands."

Russell and Verstappen will also face stiff competition from their young teammates, 19-year-old Kimi Antonelli and 21-year-old Isack Hadjar.

"If the car is capable of winning, then I will win races," the ambitious Hadjar, promoted from Racing Bulls, told AFP.

BETTER YOU KNOW

Max Verstappen described the new cars as "Formula E on steroids" and "anti-racing" after testing in Bahrain, while George Russell leapt to their defence, setting up a potential off-track rivalry if Mercedes is competitive

If the Mercedes engine has capitalised on a loophole, which will be closed mid-season, then it should also assist Norris and his teammate Oscar Piastri whose McLarens use the same power units.

"The biggest challenge at the minute is battery management and knowing how to utilise that in the best way," said Norris.

"You have a very powerful battery that doesn't last very long, so (it's) knowing when to use it, how much energy and power you use, and how to split that across the lap."

Ferrari are the last of the Big Four and after some pretty thin years they will be looking to Charles Leclerc and Lewis Hamilton to do more than make up the numbers.

Hamilton is 41 now and suffered a miserable debut season with the Italians last year when he failed to make a single Grand Prix podium.

His body language suggested he might be on the verge of quitting but the the new regulations appear to have given him a new energy to chase that record eighth world championship title once more.

"I'm re-set and refreshed," he posted on social media after pre-season testing.

"I'm not going anywhere, so stick with me. For a moment, I forgot who I was but... you're not going to see that mindset again.

"I know what needs to be done. This is going to be one hell of a season.

A rough guide to F1 rule changes for 2026

The 2026 Formula One season has been flagged up as revolutionary because of the sweeping changes to chassis and power unit regulations, designed to create more overtaking opportunities and improve the sport's eco-sustainability.

Four-time world champion Max Verstappen has already said the new cars are "not fun to drive" while Lando Norris, the man who took his crown last season, stirred the pot by saying they were fun before reversing at speed by remarking they were "certainly not the purest form of racing".

But what does that mean? How different will 2026 be to 2025 when McLaren ran away with the constructors' title with Red Bull, Mercedes and Ferrari choking on their fumes?

Here we look at the main changes:

The cars

The cars will look noticeably different to the 2025 models, notably the


Adrian Newey-designed 'pelican-nose' Aston Martin. Overall, they are 30kg lighter and 20cm shorter and 10cm more narrow. The wheelbase has been shortened which should make them more nippy through corners.

Tyres

Pirelli's 18-inch wheel size, introduced in 2022, will remain. But the width of the front tyres will be reduced by 25mm and the rears by 30mm, which will cut drag.

Wings

Changes aplenty here but the big one is the introduction of active aero which allows cars to adjust the angle of both front and rear wing elements depending on where they are on track. This, again, should cut drag and boost top speed.

The sons of DRS

The drag reduction system (DRS) is no more. In its place come two aero-mode systems which will both help the driver find speed.

- **'Z-mode'** opens elements on the front and rear wings to increase downforce and speed through corners.

- **'X-mode'** reduces drag to maximise straight-line speed.

There is also a manual 'Overtake' mode, which the drivers access through the boost button when they are one second behind the car ahead, allowing them to unlock extra energy.

There is a risk to this strategy, though, as it could leave them vulnerable to being re-overtaken on the next straight as they try to recover the electrical energy.

Power units

The power units, of which the engine is the predominant factor, are set to deliver an almost 300 per cent increase in electric power. There will also be an even split between internal combustion engine and electric power, giving cars three times more electric braking power.

The FIA is moving to close down a loophole which Audi, Honda and Ferrari believe Mercedes have found to use thermal expansion and materials technology to exceed the mandated compression ratio – something that could gain them as much of 0.3 seconds per lap.

If they start the season with the advantage, however, it will not just benefit Mercedes as they also supply Alpine, Williams... and McLaren.

Fuel

No matter who runs away with the title no one is likely to be choking on fumes, as fuel in every car will be 100 per cent sustainable, meaning no new fossil carbon will be burnt.

Fuel will instead be derived from carbon that came from non-food sources, general waste or from carbon captured from the atmosphere.