

Russell leads Mercedes 1-2 in Australian Grand Prix thriller

Mercedes leads the grid as new hybrid regulations challenge drivers at Albert Park

● Antonelli finishes second

● Leclerc and Hamilton third and fourth

● Verstappen storms from 20th to sixth

● Piastri crashes before race start

● Multiple retirements amid new rules

AFP | Melbourne

George Russell kept his cool to win a frantic season-opening Australian Grand Prix yesterday from Mercedes teammate Kimi Antonelli after a thrilling battle with Ferrari's Charles Leclerc.

The pole-sitting Briton took the chequered flag by 2.974secs in Melbourne with Leclerc third and Lewis Hamilton fourth in a race that tested Formula One's new-look cars for the first time in competitive conditions.

World champion Lando Norris came fifth -- 51 seconds adrift -- in his McLaren with Red Bull's Max Verstappen a sensational sixth after starting from 20th following a crash in qualifying.

But there was disaster for home hero Oscar Piastri, who crashed on his out-lap to the grid and failed to start with major damage to his McLaren.

With the virtual safety car repeatedly brought out, pre-season favourite Russell stayed calm to clock a sixth Grand Prix win and his first since Singapore last year.

"Feeling incredible. It was a



Mercedes' British driver George Russell drive in to pit lane after winning the Formula One Australian Grand Prix at Melbourne's Albert Park Circuit

hell of a fight in the beginning," said Russell. "We knew it was going to be challenging.

"I made a bad start and some really tight battles with Charles at the start. Just really glad to cross the finish line."

Under new rules, half of every power unit now is a battery and drivers had to recharge while braking or by lifting off the throttle to avoid it draining.

The challenge of Melbourne's 58-lap Albert Park circuit was its long sweeping straights, which deplete batteries, and relatively few twisty turns to brake and charge it up again.

Five cars failed to finish as they grappled with the changes, including Piastri, Audi's Nico Hulkenberg, Red Bull's Isack

Hadjar, Cadillac's Valtteri Bottas and Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso.

Strong pace

"Was not the best start we could have wished for, lost a lot of places and I had to recover," said Italy's Antonelli, who crashed heavily on Saturday and only just made qualifying after a major car rebuild.

"But overall was a good race, the pace was really strong especially at the end."

In fine conditions, Haas' Ollie Bearman was seventh and rookie Arvid Lindblad eighth in his Racing Bull. Audi's Gabriel Bortoleto and Alpine's Pierre Gasly rounded out the top 10.

"It was a very, very tricky race.

None of us knew what to expect," said Leclerc.

"It has been quite challenging. It looked like Mercedes had a bit more pace than us today."

When the lights turned green Leclerc, on medium tyres, got a jump on Russell while Antonelli, who started second, slid down to seventh.

Hamilton also had a flying start for Ferrari and surged to third, ahead of Hadjar.

Russell immediately hit back, reclaiming the lead on lap two before Leclerc responded a lap later to go first again as they and Hamilton began pulling clear.

It morphed into a thrilling wheel-to-wheel battle at the front, with the lead changing hands three times on lap eight

AUSTRALIAN GRAND PRIX 2026 - RACE RESULT

Pos.	Driver	Team	Laps	Time / Retd.	Pts.
1	George Russell	Mercedes	58	1:23:06.801	25
2	Kimi Antonelli	Mercedes	58	+2.974s	18
3	Charles Leclerc	Ferrari	58	+15.519s	15
4	Lewis Hamilton	Ferrari	58	+16.144s	12
5	Lando Norris	McLaren	58	+51.741s	10
6	Max Verstappen	Red Bull Racing	58	+54.617s	8
7	Oliver Bearman	Haas F1 Team	57	+1 lap	6
8	Arvid Lindblad	Racing Bulls	57	+1 lap	4
9	Gabriel Bortoleto	Audi	57	+1 lap	2
10	Pierre Gasly	Alpine	57	+1 lap	1
11	Esteban Ocon	Haas F1 Team	57	+1 lap	0
12	Alexander Albon	Williams	57	+1 lap	0
13	Liam Lawson	Racing Bulls	57	+1 lap	0
14	Franco Colapinto	Alpine	56	+2 laps	0
15	Carlos Sainz	Williams	56	+2 laps	0
16	Sergio Perez	Cadillac	55	+3 laps	0
NC	Lance Stroll	Aston Martin	43	+15 laps	0
NC	Fernando Alonso	Aston Martin	21	DNF	0
NC	Valtteri Bottas	Cadillac	15	DNF	0
NC	Isack Hadjar	Red Bull Racing	10	DNF	0
NC	Oscar Piastri	McLaren	0	DNS	0
NC	Nico Hulkenberg	Audi	0	DNS	0

as Russell and Leclerc fought for supremacy.

The virtual safety car came out on lap 12 when Hadjar's car stopped with Russell and Antonelli pitting and coming back on hards.

Leclerc and Hamilton stayed out and when they resumed the Ferraris were 10 seconds clear of Russell, with Lindblad, Antonelli and Verstappen making up the top six.

The virtual safety car was again deployed when Bottas retired with Russell eight seconds behind the Scuderia when they got going again.

With his tyres starting to

wear, Leclerc pitted on lap 26 but Hamilton stayed out and was passed by Russell before coming in.

Russell radioed that he thought a one-stop race was viable and he began pulling clear, with Antonelli second.

And there was no way back for the Ferraris, who were 15 seconds behind and barely made a dent in the Mercedes advantage in the second half of the race.

The season moves to China next weekend before Japan. Rounds four and five are scheduled for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia but are under threat given the war in Iran.

Piastri takes blame for crashing out before home Australian Grand Prix

AFP | Melbourne

Shattered home hope Oscar Piastri took responsibility for a crash on his way to the grid that ruled him out of the Australian Grand Prix, saying he was "very disappointed".

The Australian, who qualified fifth fastest, hit the kerb at Turn 4 and spun into the concrete barriers.

It left his McLaren with the front right wheel hanging off and substantial bodywork damage, ending his hopes before the Melbourne race even began.

"It's a shame. Things like that shouldn't be happening anywhere, especially at my home race where it's obviously even more disappointing," he told reporters.

"We need to review fully what happened. I think... I got on the



Oscar Piastri's car is taken from the track after a crash during the formation lap

kerb a little bit.

"We had a couple of things going on but I think the first part I want to stress is that there is certainly a big element of it that

was me," he added.

It meant Piastri's teammate Lando Norris was the only McLaren to start.

"Not the first race of the sea-

son we had hoped for," McLaren said.

"Lots of learnings to take away before we reset ahead of a sprint weekend in China."

Leclerc 'positively surprised' by Ferrari but says more work needed

AFP | Melbourne

Charles Leclerc said he was "positively surprised" by Ferrari's performance after coming third in yesterday's season-opener in Melbourne but admitted a lot of work was needed to reel in Mercedes.

The Monaco driver started fourth on the grid but had a lightning start to surge past pole-sitter George Russell and his Mercedes teammate Kimi Antonelli.

It sparked a thrilling battle with the lead changing hands multiple times before Mercedes had a better pit-stop strategy, then used sheer pace to pull clear and take the top two places.

"Very pleased is maybe a big word, but I am positively surprised, for sure, after qualifying yesterday," said Leclerc, who saw Ferrari teammate Lewis Hamilton finish a place behind in fourth.



Charles Leclerc

"I think yesterday we were not in our optimum window, but we are still very, very far off the Mercedes in qualifying, in the race, though we seem to be closer.

"It doesn't mean we are the fastest car, but we are more reasonably behind. So lots of work to be done.

"And I think this championship, anyway, will be won by development and upgrades.

"We've got plenty coming," he added. "I'm sure all the others do too, but hopefully we are on the better side of things."