

# Hamilton dominates practice

● Lewis Hamilton on top at Australian Grand Prix practice as Ferrari struggle in season's first exchanges

● Hamilton heads Bottas as Mercedes go clear of the field

● Hamilton powered round Melbourne's Albert Park circuit under clear skies with a best of one minute 22.600 seconds

AFP | Melbourne



Lewis Hamilton in action during yesterday's first practice session in Melbourne ahead of the Australian Grand Prix

Lewis Hamilton made a mockery of his claim that Ferrari would be half-a-second quicker at the Australian Grand Prix by easily clocking the fastest times in the season's opening practice runs yesterday.

The Briton led a Mercedes one-two in the second session as he powered round Melbourne's Albert Park circuit under clear skies with a best of one minute 22.600 seconds.

It bettered his pace-setting 1:23.599 in the opening practice as he kickstarted his bid for a sixth world title.

Valtteri Bottas was second (1:22.648) with Red Bull's Max Verstappen third (1:23.400), marginally ahead of impressive new teammate Pierre Gasly, who was promoted this year from Toro Rosso.

Sebastian Vettel, who has won in Melbourne for the past two years, could only manage fifth, nearly a second adrift of arch-rival Hamilton, while Ferrari partner Charles Leclerc struggled to ninth, straddling the kerb and spinning as he pushed hard late in the day.

The man Leclerc replaced, Finnish former world champ-

on Kimi Raikkonen, pushed his Alfa Romeo -- formerly Sauber -- into sixth.

The Renaults of Niko Hulkenberg and Daniel Ricciardo were sixth and seventh respectively.

"I have a positive buzz from driving the car today -- this is what I love doing. The car feels like it's in a similar place to where it was in Barcelona, which is positive coming to a different track," said Hamilton.

"We got through our programme really well, there were no issues on track. There's plenty of stuff that we can improve on, but this was not a bad start."

Hamilton is gunning for a third world crown in a row to close in on Michael Schumacher's all-time record of seven.

Much had been made of his insistence after pre-season testing in Barcelona that Ferrari were much faster, but he quickly put that fallacy to bed as he angles for an 84th pole position.

Bottas said the car felt better than during testing.

"We didn't bring a lot of new parts to the car, but we were able to optimise the package that we have," he said.

"We have an idea of how much

we can improve for qualifying, but we have no idea how much performance the other teams can still bring."

#### A bit wobbly

There was some speculation in the paddock that Ferrari may have been sandbagging, or deliberately holding back ahead of qualifying today.

Vettel slid onto the grass at turn one early in the afternoon run.

"Check the car in turns one and four. Feels quite odd... Seems to be something wrong. Box," he said on the team radio. He recovered but later told the team his car was "still a bit wobbly".

Red Bull have high hopes this year for Verstappen but he wasn't reading too much into topping the Ferraris.

"It has been alright. Mercedes looks very quick. We have lots of work to do and will analyse a lot," said the Dutchman.

Toro Rosso new boy Alexander Albon had a troubled introduction to Formula One, losing his front wing in a crash at turn two in the first practice. He slid onto the gravel again in session

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LEWIS HAMILTON

two and skidded onto the grass.

It was also a frustrating day for Poland's Robert Kubica, in his first Formula One drive since his right arm was partially severed in a horror rallying accident eight years ago.

His best time of 1:26.655 for Williams was slowest on a day marred by the sudden death on Thursday of long-serving and well-respected Formula One race director Charlie Whiting.

FIA chief Jean Todt held a minute's silence to mark his passing in a press conference, with deputy race director Michael Masi fulfilling Whiting's duties in Melbourne.

## No problem for Mercedes if Hamilton skydives or surfs

AFP | Melbourne

Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff yesterday said he had no problem with star driver Lewis Hamilton's passion for extreme sports, despite the injury risk to such a lucrative asset.

Hamilton's adrenaline-fuelled off-season hobbies, including skydiving, surfing, snowboarding and riding motorbikes, have raised eyebrows in the past.

But Wolff said the Briton was an adult and knew what helped him "decompress from racing".

"Of course, I'm always worried and we had a laugh last year because I couldn't get hold of him or my chief strategist or one of the race engineers because they were racing motorbikes," he said.

"But Lewis is not an 18- or 19-year-old young man anymore, he is a five-time world champion and he knows exactly what works for him and what doesn't.

"All these activities in my experience are not a negative distraction but something he enjoys doing and every time he decompresses from racing, he comes back stronger."

"We mustn't be judgemental," he added.

"Some people go on a mediation seminar in India, or skydiving, others are out for the ladies."

Hamilton, 34, said this week that his off-season was "a really

precious time".

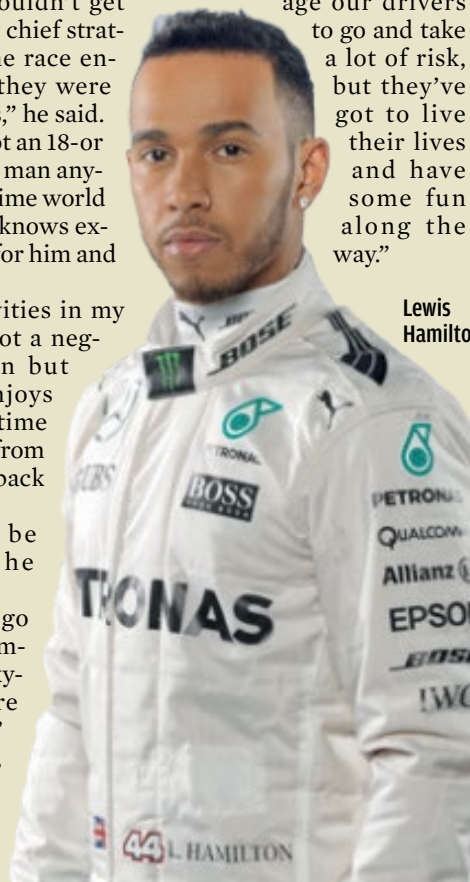
"You get to spend (time) with family and friends and it's the time you don't get to think about racing," he said.

"Then once the season starts you're on tour the whole year and you never really lose sight of your targets."

Red Bull chief Christian Horner agreed with Wolff that drivers shouldn't be restricted in what they did and there were no clauses in his team's contracts to limit dangerous activities for drivers Max Verstappen and Pierre Gasly.

"With Red Bull at the end of the day, no risk no fun," he said.

"We don't actively encourage our drivers to go and take a lot of risk, but they've got to live their lives and have some fun along the way."



Lewis Hamilton

# Thiem reaches Indian Wells semis as Monfils pull out

● Dominic Thiem to face Milos Raonic

AFP | Indian Wells

World number seven Dominic Thiem reached an ATP Indian Wells Masters semi-final showdown with Milos Raonic without hitting a ball as injured Gael Monfils withdrew.

France's Monfils, ranked 19th in the world, pulled out shortly before his scheduled quarter-final against Thiem with left Achilles tendon trouble.

Oft-injured Monfils said he'd felt discomfort in his ankle for a couple of days and had been receiving treatment, but the pain was worse after his fourth-round win over Philipp Kohlschreiber on Wednesday night.

"I tried a little jog this morn-

ing, and I couldn't really actually push on it," he said. "Then we taped it. Then I hit a little bit tonight, and I felt that I cannot be 100 percent. I have this pain, and it wasn't the right choice to play."

He said an ultrasound exam confirmed severe inflammation, and he wasn't yet sure if it would prevent him from playing the upcoming Miami Masters.

"Very disappointing, to be honest," said Monfils, who was enjoying a 15-3 start to the season. "Because I was playing great tennis, feeling strong."

Thiem is through to the semi-finals at Indian Wells for the first time, having reached the quarters once before in 2017.

"I was really surprised," Thiem said, who was waiting to be taken to the court when he realized there was a problem.

"I'm really sorry for him. Ob-



Dominic Thiem in action during his 4th round match

viously we are both playing well here. He's having a great season. I'm picking up my form again. So I think it would have been very tough but also a very fun

match for us, for the crowd. So it's a pity," said Thiem who has lost both of his prior matches against Raonic.

Raonic ended the dream run

of lucky loser Miomir Kecmanovic, beating the 19-year-old Serbian 6-3, 6-4.

Raonic, ranked 14th in the world, fired 13 aces and broke Kecmanovic once in each set to keep his bid to better his 2016 runner-up finish on track.

Kecmanovic, who failed to make it through qualifying but gained entry to the main draw when fifth-seeded Kevin Anderson withdrew, was the first lucky loser to reach the quarter-finals at Indian Wells since the tournament served as the inaugural ATP Masters 1000 in 1990.

#### Room for improvement

Raonic's serve wasn't at its booming best. He put only 55 percent of his first serves in play.

"I think that can get better," Raonic said. "But there's other things I'm doing well, for sure. As soon as I had a chance on

the first forehand, I was able to find my way to be the one dictating the point. And I put a lot of returns in and gave myself a chance there."

While the 130th-ranked Kecmanovic fell short in his bid to become just the third lucky loser to reach the semi-finals of a Masters 1000 event, he can regroup for the upcoming Miami Masters -- where he has been given a wild card into the main draw.

Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal will be vying to set up a blockbuster semi-final when they play in the other two quarter-finals today.

Federer, the 20-time Grand Slam champion who claimed his 100th career title at Dubai last month, takes on 67th ranked Hubert Hurkacz of Poland while Nadal faces 12th-seeded Russian Karen Khachanov.