

Races off, Mercedes dominance, McLaren woe: China GP talking points

Mercedes remains undefeated in 2026 while McLaren and Red Bull face reliability nightmares

● Mercedes claims second consecutive one-two

● Five-week gap before Miami GP

AFP | Shanghai

Kimi Antonelli, 19, converted being the youngest pole-sitter in history into a maiden victory at the Chinese Grand Prix after an action-packed weekend dominated by Mercedes.

Teammate George Russell took the chequered flag in the sprint but there were big problems for Red Bull's Max Verstappen while both McLarens, including world champion Lando Norris, failed to even start the race.

Let us look at three talking points from the second race weekend of the 2026 Formula One calendar at the Shanghai International Circuit:

Bahrain, Saudi headache

The paddock in China woke up on Sunday to a confirmation of the worst-kept secret in Formula One: next month's grands



Winner Mercedes' Italian driver Kimi Antonelli (2nd R) and third-placed Ferrari's British driver Lewis Hamilton (R) speak after the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix

prix in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia had been cancelled because of the war in the Middle East.

The decision leaves teams and drivers with an almost five-week gap between the Japanese Grand Prix on March 29 and the start of the Miami race weekend on May 1.

The change in schedule will

affect development plans of teams already wrestling with sweeping regulation changes and new car designs.

Many were planning to bring upgrades to the Middle East races but they will now lose six practice sessions and two races in which to gather valuable data and on-track running.

On the plus side, it will give more time behind the scenes and in the simulators to get their heads around F1's brave new world.

Mercedes dominate

Mercedes took a second consecutive one-two in China, with Antonelli leading home Russell.

Russell leads Antonelli by four points in the drivers' championship and Mercedes have 98 in the constructors' table, 31 clear of Ferrari, who seem to be their only challengers at present.

After front-row lockouts in qualifying for both races this season, it has observers predicting confidently that a Mercedes driver will be crowned world champion in 2026.

It appears just a question of whether it will be Russell or Antonelli.

Both would be champions for the first time.

McLaren, Red Bull in mire

Constructors world champions McLaren were hurting badly after neither of their drivers even made the formation lap in Shanghai.

McLaren's Oscar Piastri has now failed to start either of this season's two grands prix, though he did pick up three points for sixth place in Saturday's sprint.

A few garages along the pit lane, Verstappen and Red Bull had very little to smile about either as the four-time world champion could only qualify eighth, dropped down the field after a terrible start and then retired on lap 46 with a cooling problem.



The cancellations of the Bahrain and Saudi Arabian Grands Prix create an unusual five-week gap in the 2026 calendar, forcing teams to rethink development plans under the sport's sweeping new regulations

The once-dominant Red Bulls have suffered more than most from Formula One's sweeping new regulations and for the first time the team failed to score a point in a sprint race.

"Nothing works. So it's just not nice," fumed Verstappen. "Every lap is honestly survival for me. I'm not enjoying it at all."

After two weekends McLaren are already a massive 80 points behind Mercedes in the constructors' championship and Red Bull are a further six points back.

Bahraini junior tennis player wins Asian Development Grant

TDT | Manama

Bahraini junior tennis player Ahmed Al Sayed has received the 2025 Development Achievement Grant from the Asian Tennis Federation, recognising his strong performance in the continental rankings and marking a new milestone for the sport in the kingdom.

The award is presented annually to players who finish the season among the top ranks in Asia, and Al Sayed earned the honour after securing third place in the final Asian Under-16 boys' singles rankings for 2025. Officials said the achievement reflects the player's dedication and consistent performances throughout the season.

The grant was presented at



Ahmed Al Sayed in action (file photo)

the Bahrain Tennis Federation headquarters by federation president Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa and vice-president Sheikh Khalid bin Rashid Al Khalifa. Sheikh Abdulaziz praised the young player's discipline and commit-

ment, describing the result as a significant accomplishment for Bahraini tennis and a reflection of the federation's strategy to develop emerging talent capable of competing at continental and international levels.

Sheikh Khalid also commended Al Sayed's progress, noting that a Bahraini player reaching third place in the Asian Under-16 rankings highlights the success of national programmes aimed at nurturing promising athletes and strengthening Bahrain's presence in Asian tennis.

Al Sayed welcomed the recognition, saying the grant would serve as strong motivation to continue improving his performance and striving for further success in regional and international competitions while representing Bahrain.

Djokovic withdraws from Miami Open

AFP | Miami

World number one Novak Djokovic withdrew from next week's ATP-WTA Miami Open on Saturday in the wake of his shock exit at Indian Wells.

The 36-year-old Serbian star said in a statement on social media he had opted to skip Miami for scheduling reasons. "Unfortunately I won't be playing the @MiamiOpen this year," Djokovic announced on X, formerly Twitter.

"At this stage of my career, I'm balancing my private and professional schedule. I'm sorry that I won't experience some of the best and most pas-



sionate fans in the world. "I'm looking fw competing in MI in future!"

The 24-time Grand Slam champion returned to play the early season US hardcourt swing at Indian Wells in California, only to suffer a shock third-round exit yesterday to lowly ranked Italian Luca Nardi.

City boss Guardiola still has hope of revival against Real Madrid

AFP | London

Pep Guardiola has insisted "many things can happen" as his Manchester City side try to overturn a 3-0 deficit against Real Madrid in the Champions League.

City face a huge task to rescue their last-16 tie at the Etihad Stadium on Tuesday after following a heavy defeat by the European giants in last week's first leg at the Bernabeu Stadium.

But City manager Guardiola, speaking at his pre-match press conference yesterday, said: "It's a football game, many things can happen."

"We have to focus and try to



Manchester City's Phil Foden (L) Erling Haaland (R) react (file photo)

win the game and after see what happens. I don't have a specific

plan -- just try."

Guardiola has opted not to train on the day prior to the game as the team recover from the trip to Madrid and their 1-1 draw at West Ham on Saturday which damaged City's Premier League title hopes.

"Training won't improve us a lot and we don't have time to train," Guardiola said. "I prefer them to be at home."

The Spaniard, who made his name as a player and manager with Real's arch-rivals Barcelona, added: "We will train tomorrow (Tuesday). We will arrive at 2:00 pm (1400 GMT), move the legs a little and go. I've done it two or three times this season."

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