

Verstappen fastest

Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen steers his car during the second free practice session



The Dutchman clocks an outright circuit lap record and fastest lap at German GP practice

Hoffenheim, Germany

Max Verstappen believes he can improve and challenge for pole position after clocking an outright lap record as Red Bull topped the times in Friday's practice for the German Grand Prix.

The young Dutchman recorded a best lap of one minute and 13.085 seconds to outpace Lewis Hamilton by 0.026 seconds with Valtteri Bottas third, in the second Mercedes.

They were quickest ahead of championship leading Sebastian Vettel, who forecast a three-way scrap for pole, and his Ferrari team-mate Kimi Raikkonen.

"It's usual that Mercedes and Ferrari go faster on Saturday, but we can still improve and so I hope we can be close. Let's see what happens," said Verstappen.

On a sweltering afternoon at the Hockenheimring, with an air temperature of 31 degrees Celsius and the track at 50 degrees, most of the session was used for evaluating tyre performance.

"The weather is amazing," said Hamilton, a day after penning a new two-year deal with Mercedes.

"It's very hot, which makes it very demanding and physical in the car. It's quite a technical track even though it is a pretty short circuit.

"We've got through our programme and got all the information we needed from the tyres. The car was feeling good, but it is very close, so there's lots of work to do tonight.

"We've been working on our starts, making sure to get a better understanding of the tyres and tyre temperatures and trying to be as perfect as we can in that area."

Vettel and Ferrari appeared to



Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen

be content with their performance as they were close to the pace of the leading cars and comfortably clear of sixth placed Romain Grosjean and his Haas team-mate Kevin Magnussen, both powered by Ferrari.

Vettel said it all indicated a very close battle for pole.

"Yeah, especially for one lap," he said, of the relative speeds of the leading teams.

"I haven't seen much of the Red Bulls on the long run, but one lap it definitely is. It seems very close.

"I think it will be crucial to have a solid day tomorrow (Saturday) and a good result. It always helps and that is what we will try to do."

Vettel has never won at his 'home' Hockenheim circuit, which is only half an hour from his family home at Heppenheim, but hopes he can also improve.

"We need to see what we find and how we were compared to others. I think we are still missing a little bit in terms of one-lap performance, I think we can improve," he said.

Bottas said he felt relieved that the speculation over his place at Mercedes alongside Hamilton was now over.

"It's always nice when it's official," he said. "I think, honestly, that never in my career so far, I've known at this point already for next year so that's positive.

"I think it's really good that we can both, me and Lewis, focus on the rest of the year. I think it's going to be a tough battle between two or maybe three teams."

Monegasque rising star Charles Leclerc, widely tipped to be a target for Ferrari next season, was eighth in his Ferrari-engined Sauber ahead of Nico Hulkenberg of Renault and Esteban Ocon of Force India.

Australian Daniel Ricciardo, who upstaged Hamilton by going fastest in the morning, finished 13th in the second Red Bull after focussing on race performance because he is due to start from the back of the grid due to penalties for taking new engine parts.

Second Practice

Driver	Team	Fastest Lap
1	Red Bull	1:13.085
2	Mercedes	1:13.111
3	Mercedes	1:13.190
4	Ferrari	1:13.310
5	Ferrari	1:13.427
6	Haas	1:13.973
7	Haas	1:14.189
8	Sauber	1:14.374
9	Renault	1:14.496
10	Force India	1:14.508

First Practice

Driver	Team	Fastest Lap
1	Red Bull	1:13.525
2	Mercedes	1:13.529
3	Red Bull	1:13.714
4	Ferrari	1:13.796
5	Mercedes	1:13.903
6	Ferrari	1:14.267
7	Haas	1:14.691
8	Haas	1:14.853
9	Sauber	1:15.097
10	Renault	1:15.282

Bottas to stay

Hockenheim, Germany

Mercedes confirmed yesterday that Valtteri Bottas will continue as team-mate to Lewis Hamilton for at least another year. A day after announcing that defending four-time champion Hamilton had agreed a two-year blockbuster contract extension keeping him at Mercedes until 2020, the team said they had retained Finn Bottas for next year with an option for 2020.

"I'm really pleased," said



Bottas

Bottas. "I love working with this team, I love the team spirit, the atmosphere in the team and everyone is pushing so hard for the results.

"I will keep doing all my best to achieve those results. I will give 100 per cent as always."

Team chief Toto Wolff said: "Valtteri's performances have been excellent this season and, if not for our mistakes and his misfortune, he could be leading the drivers' championship.

"When we took the decision in favour of Valtteri for 2019, it wasn't just about his undoubted speed and work ethic, but also a question of character.

"His relationship with the team, including Lewis, is open and trusting, without any politics at all. Those are the ingredients you need when you're fighting strong rivals in both championships and they mirror the values inside the team."

Ricciardo upstages Hami in opening practice

Hockenheim, Germany

Daniel Ricciardo upstaged Lewis Hamilton to top the times for Red Bull in Friday's opening free practice.

The Australian, who is likely to start at the back of the grid after collecting grid penalties for three new power-unit parts, clocked a best lap in one minute and 13.525 to outpace the defending four-time champion's Mercedes by just 0.004 seconds.

Ricciardo's Red Bull team-mate, Dutchman Max Verstappen, was third, nearly two-tenths off the pace, ahead of championship leader and local hero Sebastian Vettel of Ferrari and Finns Valtteri Bottas, in the second Mercedes, and Kimi Raikkonen, in the second Ferrari.

Shortly before the session, Bottas was confirmed as staying at Mercedes next year to partner Hamilton, whose own

bumper two-year contract extension to the end of 2020 was announced on Thursday.

Frenchman Romain Grosjean was seventh ahead of his Haas team-mate Dane Kevin Magnussen, Monegasque Charles Leclerc of Sauber and German Nico Hulkenberg of Renault.



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MAX VERSTAPPEN



Australian Red Bull racing driver Daniel Ricciardo

There were no major incidents in a relatively quiet session that saw five Ferrari-powered cars finish in the top ten.

Ricciardo's success meant Hamilton's mini-run of being fastest in the previous three Friday opening sessions was ended.