

Verstappen's Japan GP win streak under **threat** as Mercedes dominate

Four-time champion says Suzuka is a favourite but car problems persist

● Verstappen struggling under new rules

● Red Bull start season poorly

● Mercedes dominate opening races

AFP | Suzuka

Max Verstappen says that the Japanese Grand Prix is one of his favourite races, but his chances of a fifth straight victory at the weekend look vanishingly slim as his Red Bull struggles with Formula One's sweeping new regulations.

Mercedes drivers George Russell and Kimi Antonelli will carry their early dominance into Suzuka with Ferrari's Charles Leclerc and Lewis Hamilton their nearest challengers.

Red Bull and Verstappen are scrambling to recover from a disastrous start to the Formula One season, as are McLaren whose drivers -- world champion Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri -- both failed to start in China with separate technical problems.

Verstappen, the four-time world champion, finished sixth in the opening grand prix in



Verstappen's frustrations with the 2026 regulations led him to brand the cars "anti-racing" and liken them to Mario Kart's video game mechanics, while seeking escape in a German endurance race—where he was disqualified after winning

Australia after crashing in qualifying.

He then limped home ninth and out of the points in the Shanghai sprint before retiring from the main race.

Verstappen has raged against the 2026 regulations and new car designs, branding them "anti-racing" and likening them to the Mario Kart video game with their electrical boost and overtake modes.

The Dutchman sought a change of scenery by competing at a four-hour race in Germany



Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen drives out of the pits

last weekend, but even that did not lift his gloom as he was disqualified after winning.

Verstappen has been unbeaten in Japan for the past four years and he clinched his second world title there in 2022.

His problems in China, where he was ordered to retire on lap 46 of the grand prix because of a cooling issue, suggest his Suzuka dominance could end on Sunday.

"Getting on top of our problems is not easy," Verstappen said in Shanghai.

"It would help if we would just have a normal start -- I've been every time dropping to last."

Antonelli breakthrough

Verstappen's struggles are in stark contrast to the flying start enjoyed by Mercedes, who secured one-two finishes at both

grands prix so far.

Championship leader Russell triumphed in Australia and 19-year-old Antonelli picked up the first win of his fledgling career in China.

Russell took the chequered flag in the Shanghai sprint and Mercedes will target a Suzuka triumph for the first time since Valtteri Bottas won in 2019. Antonelli, who became the

youngest pole-sitter in Formula One history in Shanghai and the second-youngest race winner after Verstappen, was given a hero's welcome when he returned to his native Bologna in Italy.

The win had "removed a bit of weight from my shoulders", said Antonelli.

"It's the kind of result which gives you strength and more awareness of what you can do."

McLaren has endured a nightmare start to the campaign under the new regulations which require battery management and energy harvesting with a 50-50 split between conventional and electrical power.

Defending champion Norris, who complained his car "sucks", is 36 points behind Russell while Piastri is yet to take part in a grand prix this season after he crashed on his way to the grid in Melbourne.

"We just have to take it on the chin, learn what the problem was and make sure it never happens again," Norris said in Shanghai.

"All of us want to go racing and score points."

The teams will have time to regroup after Suzuka, as there will be a five-week gap until the Miami GP as the Bahrain and Saudi Arabia races were cancelled because of the war in the Middle East.

Bahrain youth basketball squad heads to Germany

TDT | Manama

Bahrain's national under-18 basketball team is preparing to compete in the 31st Albert Schweitzer Tournament in Mannheim and Viernheim, Germany, from April 4 to 11. The tournament is one of the most prestigious youth competitions worldwide, attracting elite teams from across the globe.

The Bahrain Basketball Federation (BBF) confirmed that the squad will face a strong international field, including teams from Germany, Serbia, Slovenia, Türkiye, Latvia, Italy, Brazil, Sweden, China, New Zealand, and Japan. The competition offers an important opportunity for Bahraini players to test themselves against advanced basketball programs and refine their skills ahead of major regional tournaments.

In the lead-up to the tournament, Engineer Shaikh Mohammed bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, President of the BBF, visited the team's training sessions to meet players, coaches, and staff. Nader Al Awadhi, Vice President of the federation, and Mohamed Abdul Samad, Board Member and Treasurer, were also pres-



Bahrain U18 team trains ahead of the Albert Schweitzer Tournament

ent. Shaikh Mohammed encouraged the squad to perform at their best and represent Bahrain with pride. "I am confident in

your ability to showcase the progress of Bahraini basketball and achieve positive results in this important international competition," he said.

The team is following an intensive training program, focusing on technical development, physical conditioning, and team cohesion. The delegation will travel to Germany four days before the tournament begins, allowing players to acclimate to the local conditions and maximize their readiness.

Participation in the Albert Schweitzer Tournament also forms part of Bahrain's preparation for the Gulf Basketball Association (GBA) qualifiers for the FIBA U18 Asia Cup 2026 in Doha. Competing against top international sides, including Germany, Serbia, Slovenia, and Japan, will help raise the team's performance levels and provide exposure to different playing styles.

The BBF considers these international competitions critical in developing a new generation of Bahraini basketball talent, equipping players with the experience and confidence needed to represent the kingdom with distinction on both continental and global stages.

India to end home season with five Australia Tests



India's players celebrate during a match (file photo)

AFP | New Delhi

India will host Australia in a high-profile five-Test series starting January next year to end the 2026/27 home season, the country's cricket board announced yesterday.

"The season will culminate with the prestigious and much-anticipated Border-Gavaskar Trophy, featuring a five-match Test series against Australia, beginning on January 21, 2027, in Nagpur," the Board of Control for Cricket in India said.

"The contest will then move to Chennai, Guwahati, Ranchi and Ahmedabad," the board

said.

India suffered a 2-0 Test whitewash against South Africa at home last year and are placed sixth in the World Test Championship table led by Australia.

India's home season will begin with a white-ball series including three one-day matches and five T20 internationals against the West Indies starting September 27.

The cricketing powerhouse will host Sri Lanka in December 2026 for a white-ball series including three ODI and three T20I matches.

Zimbabwe will be in India for three 50-over matches in January.