

Piastri outshines Mercedes duo to go fastest in Japan practice

McLaren shows pace at Suzuka as rivals struggle for rhythm and consistency

● Piastri tops second practice session

● Antonelli and Russell follow closely

● McLaren shows unexpected strong pace

● Norris recovers after disrupted sessions

AFP | Suzuka

McLaren's Oscar Piastri powered to the fastest time in yesterday's second practice for the Japanese Grand Prix, usurping the dominant Mercedes of Kimi Antonelli and George Russell.

Piastri is yet to even start a grand prix this season but the Australian gave a reminder of his talent with a lap of 1min 30.133sec in dry, sunny conditions at Suzuka.

The 19-year-old Italian Antonelli, who won the first grand prix of his career in China two weeks ago, was second, 0.092sec behind Piastri.

Early championship leader Russell, who was fastest in the morning practice ahead of Antonelli, was third.

Piastri has endured a nightmare start to the season, crashing on his way to the grid at

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OSCAR PIASTRI

the opener in Australia and failing to start the grand prix in China because of a technical problem.

He hailed a “decent day” in Japan, with McLaren team-mate and world champion Lando Norris clocking the fourth-fastest time.

“We felt like we made some good progress, particularly in the second practice session, which was encouraging,” said Piastri.

“The feeling is positive and we've gathered some valuable data that puts us in a solid position.”

Mercedes have established themselves as the team to beat so far this season, claiming a one-two finish in both grands prix to date.

They were again out in front in the morning practice session when Russell led Antonelli to



McLaren's Australian driver Oscar Piastri drives into the pit lane during the second practice session

top the timesheets ahead of Norris and Piastri.

Piastri got the better of both Silver Arrows in the afternoon and Russell admitted the McLaren's pace was “a little bit of a surprise”.

“I don't see why it wouldn't be genuine, to be honest,” said Russell, who was 0.205sec slower than Piastri.

“I think Lando's had a disruptive day but Oscar has been pretty on it from the first lap out of

the box this morning.”

‘Tricky day’

Norris ended the practice session strongly after sitting out the first half because of a hydraulic leak.

The British driver, who did not start the Chinese Grand Prix because of a separate technical issue to Piastri, also missed half of the morning practice.

Norris called it “a tricky day”. “Around a track like this you

just want laps to build confidence and refine the set-up, and right now we're two or three steps behind with no long runs and very limited consecutive running,” he said.

Charles Leclerc was fifth ahead of Ferrari team-mate Lewis Hamilton.

Hamilton, who finished third in China for his first podium since joining Ferrari, said over his team radio that he was “very slow because I have no confi-

BETTER YOU KNOW

Piastri hasn't even started a race this season but still topped practice, underlining McLaren's sudden turnaround in pace

dence in the car”.

Red Bull's four-time world champion Max Verstappen was 10th, 1.376sec slower than Piastri.

Alonso had an eventful morning and he was again in the thick of it in the second practice.

The Williams driver almost shunted into Alpine's Pierre Gasly in the pits and later came to a standstill for several seconds on the track before regaining power.

Alonso crashed into Cadillac's Sergio Perez in the morning and also skidded deep into the gravel before clipping a barrier.

Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso took part in the afternoon practice after being replaced by reserve driver Jak Crawford for the morning session.

Alonso arrived in Japan late following the birth of his first child.

Alexander-Arnold must accept ‘unfair’ England snub, says Tuchel

AFP | London

England manager Thomas Tuchel says he has been “a degree unfair” on Trent Alexander-Arnold after excluding the Real Madrid right-back despite naming a 35-man squad for friendlies against Uruguay and Japan.

The matches at Wembley yesterday and Tuesday are the final opportunities for players to impress in an England shirt before Tuchel names his squad for the World Cup.

However, Alexander-Arnold's chances of selection for the tournament in north America appear slim as he not only missed out on the initial squad, but was also overlooked in favour of Arsenal's Ben White after Jarrell Quansah dropped out due to injury.

White has not played for England since leaving the 2022 World Cup early and then making himself unavailable for selection under Tuchel's predecessor, Gareth Southgate.



Trent Alexander-Arnold

“A sportive choice. Maybe a hard choice and maybe to a degree unfair,” said Tuchel on Thursday when asked to explain the omission of former Liverpool defender Alexander-Arnold.

“I know it creates noise when you leave a player like Trent out. We had a call, I tried to explain the situation. He just has to accept it.”

World Cup boost as late goal earns Australia 1-0 win over Cameroon

AFP | Sydney

Jordan Bos snatched a late winner as a lacklustre Australia edged Cameroon 1-0 for a confidence-boosting victory as they fine-tune preparations ahead of the World Cup.

There were few opportunities in the dour friendly at Sydney's Stadium Australia until the Feyenoord midfielder pounced with five minutes left.

Ajdin Hrustic missed a penalty in the much-needed win for a side that suffered two losses in the previous international window, falling 1-0 to Venezuela and 3-0 to Colombia.

The clash was part of the FIFA Series 2026, a mini-tournament that also features fellow World Cup qualifier Curacao, who were beaten 2-0 by China in an earlier match at the same venue.

“First half we couldn't really break through, and then second half we kept on coming,” Bos said.

“We had some chances and it was coming down to the last



Australia's Jordan Bos (C) celebrates after scoring

10 minutes, and I got the goal in and we got the win. So that's important.”

The Socceroos will be at a sixth straight World Cup and coach Tony Popovic used the match to run his eye over some inexperienced players.

With a host of places in his World Cup squad still up for grabs, he handed debuts to 18-year-old Colorado Rapids defender Lucas Herrington and Poland-based striker Deni Juric.

Neither player showed nerves in a lively opening as the hosts

pressed for an early breakthrough.

But they struggled to keep control against a young Cameroon side rebuilding after failing to qualify for the World Cup.

Chances in the first half were few and far between on a slippery pitch, with both sides missing a creative spark.

Popovic replaced Juric and Martin Boyle with Awer Mabil and Nestory Irankunda up front for the second half and the intensity lifted.

It culminated with Cameroon debutant Oliver Kamdem conceding a penalty with 20 minutes left, but goalkeeper Devis Epassy went the right way to deny Hrustic.

Irankunda twice went close as the clock ticked down before Bos's late heroics, beating a defender after being fed the ball by Paul Okon.

Australia are in World Cup Group D with co-hosts the United States, Paraguay and a yet-to-be-determined European nation.