

## Ducati's Zarco sets pace at Barcelona practice



Johann Zarco  
Reuters | London

Johann Zarco of Ducati-Pramac was fastest over the two practice sessions for the Catalan Grand Prix at Montemelo yesterday and the Frenchman said he felt 'at home'.

The Barcelona-Catalunya circuit hosts the seventh race of 21 on Sunday, when second-placed Zarco is hoping to close the gap on world championship leader Fabio Quartararo of Yamaha.

Outsider, Franco Morbidelli led the session on his Yamaha before Zarco edged the session by 0.021sec, with Quartararo in third.

The 30-year-old Zarco signed an extension deal with Pramac to continue with the Ducati satellite until the end of 2022 this week and was in festive spirits.

"It's a great life, this is my team now, my bike," he said.

"This Catalan GP is a bit like a home GP for French people from the south," he said of the event some 25km north of Barcelona and an hour's drive from the French border, said Zarco, who is from Cannes.

"Most of the fans here are French too."

# Bahrain shift focus to Iran test

Senior men's national football team looking to ride their momentum from 8-0 drubbing of Cambodia on Thursday into their crucial qualifier against Iranian counterparts on Monday

● Both Bahrain and Iran, along with Iraq, are battling for one of the top two spots in Group C at the end of their eight-match campaigns

TDT | Manama

Star midfielder Kumail Alaswad said that Bahrain's national team must now have their sights set on their biggest challenge yet following their blowout 8-0 victory over Cambodia on Thursday, in joint-qualifying for the FIFA World Cup 2022 and AFC Asian Cup 2023.

The Bahrainis face continental giants Iran on Monday in a match that could decide their fate in the qualification process.

Both Bahrain and Iran, along with Iraq, are battling for one of the top two spots in Group C at the end of their eight-match campaigns.

The top team get an automatic berth in the next round of World Cup qualifying while the runners-up will hope to go through as one of the four best second-placed sides from the eight groups in this stage. The top two also secure their berths in the Asian Cup.

With so much to play for in Monday's contest, Alaswad is looking for his team to ride their momentum from their Cambodia win into their crucial clash with Iran.

"We should now forget this



Kumail Alaswad stretches during training last night at Al Ahli Club in Zinj



**Bahrain's match against Iran on Monday will be their penultimate fixture in this round of joint-qualifying for the FIFA World Cup 2022 and AFC Asian Cup 2023. In their previous meeting held in October of 2019, Bahrain won 1-0 with a Mohammed Al Hardan second-half penalty**

win and start preparing for the match against Iran," Alaswad was quoted as saying on the-afc.com.

"The coach will meet us to talk about the positives and the negatives and we must have a good performance in the next match in order to get the three points."

Al Aswad also said that the Bahrainis could have won by a bigger margin on Thursday, considering the many other chances they had at goal.

"We had an excellent performance today and followed the instructions of the coach in the best possible way," he said. "We took advantage of the chances that we created."

"There is no doubt that winning with this result will boost our confidence. Despite scoring eight goals, we missed chances as well and this should not hap-



Bahrain national team players doing drills as they resumed training last night in preparation for their match with Iran on Monday

“We should now forget this win and start preparing for the match against Iran... We must have a good performance in the next match in order to get the three points

KUMAIL ALASWAD

pen in the next match."

The result put Bahrain in first place in Group C with 12 points, but they have played one game more than Iraq, who are second with 11 points, and Iran, who are third with nine.

Meanwhile, head coach Helio Sousa was pleased with his players' impressive showing, and said that their two first-half goals helped propel their second-half barrage.

"The early goal helped us a lot and the second goal at the end of the first half made things easy for us to score six more in the second half," said the Portuguese tactician in his post-match Press conference.

He added: "The preparation of the team in the previous period was excellent as we played many friendlies. The players had an excellent performance today and I hope they can continue this way in the upcoming matches."

"We have a great group of players who fit to the style of play that we want and hopefully, we can get good results moving forward."

On Monday, Bahrain and Iran face off at 7.30pm at the National Stadium in Riffa, while Iraq take on Cambodia in the earlier match at 5.30pm at Shaikh Ali bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Stadium at Muharraq Club in Arad.

## Perez leads Red Bull one-two as Mercedes struggle in Azerbaijan

Reuters | Baku

Red Bull's Sergio Perez set the pace in Azerbaijan Grand Prix practice yesterday with championship-leading team mate Max Verstappen close behind while Lewis Hamilton and Mercedes failed to make the top 10.

The Mexican driver lapped the Baku street circuit with a best time of one minute 42.115 seconds, 0.101 quicker than Verstappen.

"We've done very good progress, after Monaco we did a very deep analysis and today was like 'Wow, I finally understand a bit more this car, how I need to drive it,'" said Perez, who joined Red Bull this season.

"In all regards I think this is the best Friday of the season, the most complete Friday in terms of data and how comfortable I feel with the car," added the man who has twice stood on the podium in Baku.

"I think we are definitely going to be in the mix."

Verstappen had been fastest in the first session with a time of 1:43.184.

The 23-year-old Dutch driver is four points clear of Hamilton, seizing the lead by winning in Monaco last month while Hamilton finished seventh.

"Performance-wise we had a great start to the weekend so



Red Bull's Mexican driver Sergio Perez steers his car during the second practice session

far," he said. "The car in FP1 (first practice) felt really decent and I was quite comfortable. Then for FP2 we made a few changes to see if it would be better but I think we went a bit backwards."

Seven times world champion Hamilton, Verstappen's closest rival after five races, was only 11th and more than a second off the pace as the once-dominant team struggled again.

His Finnish team mate Valtteri Bottas, the winner last time Azerbaijan hosted a race in 2019, was 16th and more than two seconds slower than Perez. He had been 10th in the first practice.

Hamilton said he had done all the laps required, without any mistakes, but the pace was miss-

ing as it had been two weeks ago in Monaco.

"We're definitely quite a chunk down and I think everyone will be scratching their heads and looking into the data trying to figure out how we can improve," he added.

"It didn't feel good in this session. I was pushing, I was on the limit but the car is limited. There's areas that it should be quicker but there's no more grip."

"It's not easy to be out of the top 10 in pace when we've had pace in other places but I don't really know why we're where we are."

Ferrari's Carlos Sainz was third in both sessions.

His team mate Charles Leclerc was second fastest in first practice and fourth in the af-

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SERGIO PEREZ

ternoon, when he nosed into the barriers and smashed the front wing.

Ferrari still looked the team most likely to be challenging Red Bull for pole position on Saturday.

The "dirty" track proved slippery for drivers, who also had to contend with breezy conditions, as the sport returned to Baku without spectators due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The weekend has been dominated by a row over "bendy" rear wings, with the governing FIA keeping a close eye on the situation before introducing new tests at the following French Grand Prix.

## Cycling's Egan Bernal has Covid-19



Team Ineos rider Colombia's Egan Bernal kisses the race's Trofeo Senza Fine (Endless Trophy) on the podium after winning the Giro d'Italia 2021

AFP | London

Colombian Egan Bernal is isolating with mild symptoms after contracting Covid-19, less than a week after he won the three-week Giro d'Italia cycling race, his personal communications team said yesterday.

Also a winner of the Tour de France Bernal and his girlfriend Maria Fernanda Gutierrez took a coronavirus test before traveling home to Colombia from Monaco "and have just been informed of the test results in which both are infected with the virus," the cyclist's press team said in a statement.

A source from the Colom-

bian Cycling Federation confirmed to AFP the authenticity of the statement.

The 24-year-old remains "in quarantine in Monaco" and neither he nor Gutierrez have shown any signs of "complications," the statement said.

Bernal stormed to Giro victory in May after dominating the first two weeks of the race, before holding off spirited resistance from Briton Simon Yates and Italy's Damiano Caruso in the final few days.

He stormed onto the scene in 2019 by winning the Tour de France, cycling's most prestigious race, even beating his Ineos Grenadiers teammate and reigning champion Geraint Thomas into second.