

Russell leads Hamilton in Friday practice at Suzuka

Mercedes pair edge Max Verstappen in soaking Japanese GP second practice

● Schumacher crashes

AFP | Suzuka

George Russell and Lewis Hamilton made it a Mercedes one-two ahead of title-chasing Max Verstappen in a wet-dry second practice yesterday for the Japanese Grand Prix.

Runaway Red Bull leader Verstappen can clinch his second straight world title on Sunday if he wins the race with the fastest lap, no matter what his rivals do.

But he was beaten to the quickest time in the second practice session by the Mercedes pair, with Russell clocking a fastest lap of 1min 41.935sec.

Seven-time world champion Hamilton followed his fellow Briton 0.235sec behind, with Verstappen coming in third, a sizeable 0.851sec behind Russell.

A rainy start to the session at Suzuka meant the drivers began on wet tyres but switched to intermediates once the conditions improved.

That did not satisfy Verstappen though, with the flying Dutchman telling his team "all tyres are s---, no grip", over the radio.

Dry conditions are expected for Saturday's qualifying but some rain is forecast for Sunday.

"It's probably not going to be that representative for this weekend but definitely good



Mercedes' British driver George Russell steers his car during a practice session

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LEWIS HAMILTON

learning for the future," Russell said of the conditions.

"Nevertheless, it's always nice to end the day top of the timesheets."

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc, Verstappen's nearest rival in the championship standings, finished 2.774sec behind Russell in 11th.

The Monaco driver bounced off the track and found himself on the gravel at one point, complaining that the jolt had damaged his front tyre.

His team later found a problem with his brakes and called him in before sending him back out 10 minutes later.

"The feeling is totally bad for some reason, I will try to make it better," Leclerc said over the radio.

Hamilton savours history

Verstappen's Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez was fourth, followed by Haas driver Kevin Magnussen and Ferrari's Carlos Sainz in sixth.

Mick Schumacher of Haas did not take part in the second practice after he crashed in the first session.

Schumacher spun into the barriers and onto the grass after the chequered flag, destroying his front wing and requiring a new chassis.

Two-time world champion Fernando Alonso went quickest

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With four races remaining after Suzuka, Verstappen will be champion for the second year in succession if he leaves Japan with a gap of at least 112 points

in the wet first practice, and seventh in his Alpine in the second.

The Japanese Grand Prix returns on Sunday after a three-year absence because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Fans turned up to watch practice in colourful costumes despite the grim conditions, and Hamilton said he enjoyed being back after three years away.

"It's always special when you do your first lap out, you think of all the legends as you come up to the last chicane," he said, recalling Ayrton Senna and Alain Prost's famous collision on the course in 1989.

"You just think you are driving through a space, a point on the circuit which had so much history. At that moment you think of the time before and how privileged you are to be in the position."

Bahrain bow out of Asian U-17 qualifiers with loss



Action from Bahrain's loss to Iraq

TDI | Manama

Bahrain signed off from the 2023 AFC U-17 Asian Cup in Muscat with a tough 0-3 loss to Iraq yesterday in their final Group C game.

The nationals conceded all three of their goals in the second half, and could not manage a reply.

The result was the second loss for the Bahrainis in four matches and they ended their qualification campaign with just four points from four games. They posted just one win and also had one draw—

officially dashing their hopes of booking a seat in the Asian Cup.

There were 44 nations in all in the qualifiers. They have been divided into 10 groups—four with five teams and six with four teams.

In each group, teams played each other once at a centralised venue. The ten group winners and the five best runners-up qualify for the final tournament.

The teams making it through from Bahrain's group will be confirmed on Monday following the final fixtures.

Nagelsmann looking for 'control' against unpredictable Dortmund

AFP | Munich

Bayern Munich manager Julian Nagelsmann said yesterday his team needs to show "a more controlled game" to beat opponents Borussia Dortmund.

"There's a lot of reporting about Dortmund showing 'fluctuating performances' within recent games. I don't think it's that dramatic. I think they're having a good season and will be a top opponent tomorrow," Nagelsmann said.

Djokovic sets up Medvedev clash in Astana semi-finals

AFP | Astana

Novak Djokovic dominated Russian Karen Khachanov 6-4, 6-3 to reach the Astana ATP semi-finals yesterday where he will face Daniil Medvedev.

"I didn't play as well from the baseline as I did in the first two matches, but still it was enough," said Djokovic.

"I managed to produce some good tennis when it was the most needed in both sets."

Facing the US Open semi-finalist, the Serb dropped serve for the first time this week but still has not lost a set since returning to the ATP Tour after a three-month break following his Wimbledon title.

He made his comeback at the Laver Cup team event in London before winning the Tel Aviv tournament last weekend for his 89th career crown.

In the semi-finals, Djokovic will face world number four Medvedev, the man who ended his bid for a calendar Grand Slam in 2021 by winning the US Open.

"I always expect highs from myself," said 21-time Grand Slam title winner Djokovic.

"Hopefully I can elevate still the level of my game for tomorrow because it's going to



Novak Djokovic in action

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be needed."

Medvedev made the last-four by seeing off Roberto Bautista Agut of Spain 6-1, 6-1 to record his 40th win of 2022.

Second seed Medvedev trails Djokovic 6-4 in career meet-

ings.

"I am really happy to play against Novak," Medvedev said.

"I thought about it before the match and we have only played one tournament together this year, which was Roland Garros. This is the second one and we meet again and I am really happy."

In Saturday's other semi-finals, Andrey Rublev, the fifth seed from Russia, will tackle Greek third seed Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Yesterday, Rublev defeated Adrian Mannarino 6-1, 6-2 while Tsitsipas saw off Hubert Hurkacz 7-6 (10/8), 6-3.

Guardiola hails humility of Man City stars to welcome Haaland

AFP | London

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola has praised the manner in which his star-studded squad have embraced the arrival of Erling Haaland without getting jealous over the Norwegian's media attention.

Haaland has scored 19 times in 11 competitive games for the English champions in a stunning start to his career at City.

Under Guardiola, City have won the Premier League four times in the last five years among nine major trophies.

"Every press conference - 50 questions, 45 on Erling. For me it is ok and the guys here accept it perfectly," said Guardiola yesterday.

"I've had the type of guys who wouldn't like it. Four Premier Leagues, fighting for everything, just talking about Erling? In other clubs, other people wouldn't like it.

"Here, they are delighted. We don't have incredible players who'd say: 'All the time they just talk about him'. This is why it is a joy to train these type of



Manchester City's manager Pep Guardiola (R) Erling Haaland

players."

Haaland has scored in nine consecutive City games and was robbed of the chance to score a fourth hat-trick in five home matches when Guardiola withdrew him at half-time of Wednesday's 5-0 win over FC Copenhagen after he struck twice in the first half.

And Guardiola hailed Haaland's poacher's instinct to seemingly always be in the right place when the ball breaks his way inside the box.

"He has an incredible instinct. What can I teach him?

Haaland has scored in nine consecutive City games and was robbed of the chance to score a fourth hat-trick in five home matches when Guardiola withdrew him at half-time of Wednesday's 5-0 win over FC Copenhagen after he struck twice in the first half

He has an incredible sense as a striker of where the ball is going to finish and he goes one second before the ball arrives," added Guardiola.

"He has this talent, this quality. All the time - a cross, a deflection - he is there. This type of player - how can a manager teach him? It is impossible. It is instinct, completely natural.

"He did it in Norway, in Austria, in Germany and he does it here. He smells it.

"Thank you so much to him for choosing us, and to all the people involved bringing him here. We are fortunate to have this talent with us."