



Champion

Italy's Andrea Dovizioso won the season-opening Qatar MotoGP for the second year running on Sunday, holding off a desperate challenge from world champion Marc Marquez

Ferrari's Leclerc set for big time

Paris, March 11: Ferrari's new driver Charles Leclerc is only 21 and the second youngest driver in the history of Formula One's most famous stable.

But he is already making waves as he embarks on his second Grand Prix season with a growing maturity that was on display in his rookie performance for Sauber last year. He finished the year in 13th place overall in the drivers' championship with one top six finish and his credit.

Born within earshot of the world's most iconic Grand Prix circuit, Monte Carlo, Leclerc was seen from an early age as a hot prospect with impeccable racing pedigree. His late father Herve was a Formula 3 driver and Leclerc raced for the first time aged just four on a circuit owned by his father's best friend, Philippe Bianchi.

His son Jules Bianchi, a mentor and role model for Leclerc, made a name for himself in racing before his tragic death following a crash at the 2014 Japanese Grand Prix. Expectations are high this season that Ferrari and Leclerc's teammate Sebastian Vettel can break Lewis Hamilton's stranglehold on the world championship and win the title for the Italian giants for the first time since 2007.

Hamilton is challenging for his sixth title and third in a row this year. But the experienced four-time world champion Vettel, 31, was fastest of all the drivers during pre-season team testing in Spain in February.

Remarkably, Leclerc was just behind him in second spot. The Monaco native is a product of Ferrari's driving academy, and he is comfortable with the Italian way of doing things ahead of next weekend's season opener in Australia.

"I get on well with Italians," he said recently. "Which makes things easier when I meet, for example, my future mechanics at Ferrari."

"What I have always liked about Italians is the way they are serious when they need to be but know how to relax and have a laugh too."

"That is very important for life balance for a driver: to have an understanding with the team."

Leclerc joined the elite Ferrari academy in 2016, and is the only graduate to win a place in the cockpit as a Ferrari Grand Prix racer.

"I was pretty emotional when the car was unveiled, that was a very special day for me. But now that I am actually at the track, I have switched to work mode, and I am trying to put the emotion to one side." — AFP



Rise of Phoenix

Lowly Suns shock Warriors, Lowry shines for Raptors

Los Angeles, March 11: Phoenix guard Devin Booker scored 37 points as the Suns snapped an 18-game losing streak to the two-time defending NBA champion Golden State Warriors with a 115-111 victory on Sunday.

Golden State had no answer for Booker's late charge as the American scored 13 consecutive points during a key fourth quarter stretch for the Suns.

The win ended the league's longest active losing streak to one team, which dated back to November 2014. It was also the first road victory for the Suns in 20 games against a Western Conference opponent.

"We are getting challenged, we are getting teams' best shots," said Warriors superstar Stephen Curry.

Kevin Durant had 25 points for the mistake-prone Warriors before leaving with a bruised right ankle midway through the fourth quarter.

Golden State coach Steve Kerr said after the game that the injury did not seem serious and that an MRI would likely not be needed.

"I think he's going to be all right," Kerr said. "He had an ankle contusion, but I don't think it's bad."

Booker made all nine of his free throws and had 11 assists while Kelly Oubre scored 22 points for the Suns, who won their fourth game in the last five.

Booker hit a jump shot with five minutes to go in the fourth and then drained a three-pointer to make it 102-98 with 4:45 remaining.



Phoenix Suns guard Devin Booker (right) shoot against Golden State Warriors guard Klay Thompson during the first half of an NBA game on Sunday. — AP

Toronto rout Miami

Elsewhere, Kyle Lowry finished with 24 points and 10 assists as the Toronto Raptors snapped the Miami Heat's win streak at four games with a 125-104 blowout victory.

Lowry drained six three pointers and Pascal Siakam added 20 points for the Raptors, who have swept all three meetings with the Heat this season.

Raptors star Kawhi Leonard did not play — the team did not give a specific reason but he is not believed to be hurt.

In another match, Joel Embiid scored 33 points in his first game back after missing eight with a sore knee as the Philadelphia 76ers beat the Indiana Pacers, 106-89. — AFP

The weather conditions meant it had nothing to do with football and wasn't much fun

— Leverkusen coach Peter Bosz after 3-2 win over Hanover in snow

SHORT TAKES

1000th century break for Ronnie

London: Ronnie O'Sullivan recorded a snooker landmark on Sunday when he became the first player to compile 1,000 career century breaks en route to winning the Players Championship final in Preston.

The English five-times world champion, the most gifted and arguably greatest cue man the game has known, recorded the three 100-plus breaks in his 10-4 victory over Australian Neil Robertson that he needed to reach the milestone.

The player known throughout snooker as "the Rocket" made breaks of 116 and 105 as he shot into a 7-2 lead at the end of the first session before achieving the landmark, fittingly, in the final frame with a 134 to retain his title.

A measure of the 43-year-old's achievement in his 50th career final is that Scotland's Stephen Hendry (775) and John Higgins (745) are the only others to have passed 700.

"I just played really, really well. I played well all week, but I played brilliantly today and to cap it off with 1,000 centuries is great," he said. — Reuters

IAAF approves changes in DL

Doha: The IAAF has approved major changes to Diamond League events from next year including reducing the number of events at each meeting from 32 to 24, officials said Monday.

Following a year-long review, the IAAF has also decided to cut down the length of each meeting from two hours to 90 minutes, said Jon Ridgeon, the British former hurdler who has chaired a working group looking at possible changes.

"Change is never easy but should, wherever possible, be done from a position of strength which is what we have done," said Ridgeon at a press conference in Doha, where the IAAF council has been meeting for the past two days.

Under the changes, from next year the longest distance track race in a Diamond League will be 3,000 metres.

The number of Diamond League meetings over the course of a season will also be reduced from the current 14 to 12. And there will also be one season final, instead of two, from 2020.

The IAAF will also put more emphasis on out-of-stadium and city centre field events, added Ridgeon. — AFP

ALAN WARNS LIVES COULD BE AT RISK

London: Former England striker Alan Shearer has warned that players' lives could be at risk unless urgent action is taken to prevent pitch invaders as the Professional Footballers' Association called for a full inquiry.

Aston Villa captain Jack Grealish was punched by a Birmingham fan and Manchester United defender Chris Smalling was confronted on the pitch by an Arsenal supporter in two separate incidents on Sunday.

It followed an episode on Friday in which Rangers captain James Tavernier was challenged by a pitch-invading Hibernian fan in his side's stormy Scottish Premiership draw.

English football has been blighted by a number of incidents of racist chanting and abuse over recent months that, together with the pitch invasions, are an unwelcome reminder of the hooliganism that used to blight the game.

"It is absolutely disgusting and if we don't stamp it out now, next time it could be a knife," Shearer said in his column in the Sun newspaper.

"It's that serious. Where are we at in football when some thug thinks that is what he is going to do?"

Grealish was assaulted by Birmingham fan while Smalling was confronted. — AFP

INDIAN WELLS | TENNIS

Rafa, Federer advance to Round 3

Indian Wells, March 11: World number two Rafael Nadal raced into the third round of the ATP Indian Wells Masters as Roger Federer made a less speedy start to his quest for a sixth title on Sunday.

Nadal, a three-time Indian Wells winner, needed just 72 minutes to get past overmatched Jared Donaldson, 6-1, 6-1.

Federer, who is seeking to break out of a tie with top seed Novak Djokovic for most titles in the California desert, looked set for a similarly easy time of it, but had to turn back a second-set challenge from German Peter Gojowczyk in a 6-1, 7-5 win.



Roger Federer of Switzerland reacts after defeating Peter Gojowczyk of Germany 6-1, 7-5 at the BNP Paribas Open tennis tournament on Sunday. — AP

Fourth-seeded Federer said he was relieved not to go to a second-set tiebreaker after falling behind 3-1 to the free-swinging German, who is ranked 85th in the world.

The Swiss regained the break and, after saving four break points to make it 4-4, cruised home.

Federer next faces compatriot Stan Wawrinka, a three-time Grand Slam champion currently unseeded as he continues his return from injury.

Wawrinka won a taut thriller against 29th-seeded Hungarian Marton Fucsovics, 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 7-5, finally sealing it on his fifth match point after three hours and 24 minutes when Fucsovics lofted a lob long.

Nadal, playing his third tournament of a year that started with a crushing loss to Djokovic in the Australian Open final and included an early exit in Acapulco, converted five of his six break chances against Donaldson and never faced a break point himself.

He next faces Diego Schwartzman, who beat Spain's Roberto Carballes, 6-3, 6-1. Nadal is 6-0 against the Argentine. — AFP

Indian Wells, March 11: Serena Williams' first tournament since the Australian Open came to an abrupt end on Sunday as the ailing 23-time Grand Slam champion retired from her third-round WTA match against Garbine Muguruza at Indian Wells.

Muguruza was leading 6-3, 1-0 when Williams called it a day in the battle of former world number ones because of a viral illness.

"Before the match, I did not feel great, and then it just got worse with every second; extreme dizziness and extreme fatigue," Williams said.

The 10th-seeded American had made a strong start, winning the first three games. But she called for the trainer after dropping six straight. — AFP

Doping ban on Russia remains

Paris, March 11: The IAAF said on Monday that it will maintain its ban on Russian athletes over doping that it imposed in 2015, following a council meeting of top officials in Qatar.

Rune Andersen, head of the doping task force for the International Association of Athletics Federations, said two outstanding issues remained — the examination of data received from the Moscow anti-doping lab and the issue of outstanding costs being sought from Russia because of the scandal.

"Two key issues remain outstanding," said Andersen at a press conference in Doha. "These need to be resolved."

He also said his task force was looking into claims that coaches from the discredited Russian athletics regime were still involved in the sport which, Andersen said, "run counter to assurances" received from Moscow.

Asked if this latest extension of the ban meant Russian athletes would not be able to compete under the flag at this year's world championships in Doha in September and October, Andersen said there was still time but conditions "have to be met" by Russia.

A team from the World Anti-Doping Agency

- Two key issues remain outstanding. These need to be resolved: IAAF
- Russian athletes are allowed to compete under a neutral banner

(WADA) gained access to the Moscow laboratory at the centre of the scandal in January and officials are working their way through the mass of data recovered.

The IAAF suspended Russia in November 2015 after the eruption of a vast state-sponsored doping scandal. The decision to keep the ban in place was the 10th time the IAAF has turned down Russia's appeal for reinstatement, having requested the same assurances when it upheld the ban in December.

The International Olympic Committee lifted their suspension of the Russian Olympic Committee a year ago and WADA reinstated Russia in September.

Russia's Paralympic ban was lifted in early February.

The IAAF is the last of the high-profile sports bodies to ban athletes from competing under the Russian flag. — AFP

OGIER MAKES IT FIVE RALLY WINS IN MEXICO

Mexico, March 11: Sebastian Ogier won his fifth Rally of Mexico on Sunday to add to his success in the season-opening Monte Carlo to go second in the championship standings.

Citroen's defending champion held the overnight advantage going into the final day and the Frenchman finished in style posting the quickest time in the concluding power stage.

Estonia's Ott Tanak finished second in a Toyota, half a minute adrift with Elfyn Evans of Wales driving a Ford Focus in third.

Tanak retained the lead in the championship which now moves on to Corsica at the end of the month.

For six-time world champion Ogier the Mexico win came on the back of a rare flat showing in Sweden last time out when he trailed in almost half an hour behind Tanak.

He rose to the top of the time sheets on Friday aided by the retirement of Andreas Mikkelsen and held his rivals at bay despite suffering a puncture on Saturday and seeing Tanak take two of Sunday's remaining specials on dusty mountain roads near Leon. — AFP

Insigne grabs a point for Napoli

Milan, March 11: Lorenzo Insigne netted a late equaliser for Napoli in a frustrating 1-1 stalemate at Sassuolo on Sunday to leave Carlo Ancelotti's side trailing league leaders Juventus by 18 points as Serie A rivals Inter Milan warmed up for next weekend's derby against AC Milan with a 2-0 win at home to SPAL.

Captain Insigne scored four minutes from time after Domenico Berardi had

put midtable Sassuolo into a 52nd minute lead in Modena.

Napoli's hopes of a first league title since 1990 have faded as Juventus continued their charge towards an eighth consecutive Scudetto with a 4-1 win over Udinese on Friday.

Napoli are far behind in second, six points ahead of AC Milan, who beat bottom club Chievo 2-1 on Saturday for a fifth league win in a row. Inter Milan are at fourth. — AFP

Bengaluru FC qualify for second straight final

Bengaluru, March 11: Bengaluru FC sealed their place in the final of the Indian Super League for the second successive year with a 3-0 win against NorthEast United FC in the second leg of the play-off at the Sree Kanteerava Stadium, here on Monday.

The Blues, who were dominant throughout the game, were made to work hard by a resilient NorthEast United who were finally outdone by a 72nd-minute goal from Miku. Late strikes from Dimas Delgado (87') and Sunil Chhetri (90+2') followed as Bengaluru overturned the 2-1 defeat in the first leg.



Miku (centre) celebrates a goal with his Bengaluru FC teammates against NorthEast United FC on Monday. — ISL

The aggregate score read 4-2 in favour of the Blues who will now look to land their first ever ISL title in Mumbai on Sunday. Miku missed two scoring chances in first half but made amends later. — Agencies

MUMBAI PRAY FOR MIRACLE IN GOA

Margao, March 11: Mumbai City FC are hoping for a miracle to overturn a four-goal deficit as they take on FC Goa in their second leg semifinal of the ISL here on Tuesday.

Mumbai were hammered 5-1 at home in the first leg semi-final. Now, as they prepare for the second leg at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, coach Jorge Costa is left hoping for an unlikely miracle.

No team has ever overcome such a deficit in Indian football and Costa knows his chances of re-

ating a massive upset is almost impossible.

Mumbai were in the game till the first half an hour when they took the lead. Even at 1-2 down in the first half, they seemed to have a chance until Goa turned on the magic in the second half.

When Mumbai visited Fatorda during the league stage, they were hammered 5-0. After the first leg, Goa have now scored 12 goals against the Islanders in three matches and 24 goals overall, compared to Mumbai's nine. — PTI