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FORMULA 1

Verstappen
joins triple
champs, with
more to come

Dutchman equals
record of winning title
with six races to go

By Sahana Bidappa
Doha

Having sewn up his third successive world title with six rounds to go, the general opinion on the paddock and among pundits is that Max Verstappen will get only better from here on.

While the Red Bull driver's hapless rivals would not be happy with that view, it is certain Verstappen will not stop at winning three titles, especially having the fastest car at his disposal.

The Dutchman's dominance has been such that he has put seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton, not long ago his fierce rival, chasing shadows on his underperforming Mercedes car.

While Verstappen's first title came under acrimonious circumstances on the last lap of the 2021 season on a wild night in Abu Dhabi, his next two have been smooth sailing. The 26-year-old won his second title last year in Japan with four races to spare, and this time he has gone one better.

He has already won 13 races out of 16 this season and will start as outright favourite for today's Qatar Grand Prix at the Lusail International Circuit, where he is in pole position.

With five races to go after Qatar, Verstappen is on course to break his own record for most races won (15) in a single season, which he achieved in 2022. Such has been his domination, he went on a record 10 successive victories in a single season between Miami in May to Monza in September.

After his second place finish in the sprint race yesterday took Verstappen to his third title, he joined an elite club of Formula 1 drivers, namely Sir Jack Brabham, Sir Jackie Stewart, Niki Lauda, Nelson Piquet and Ayrton Senna.

Asked, meanwhile, whether he was already eyeing up future titles, Verstappen replied yesterday: "We'll just see what happens. I'm enjoying the moment and hopefully of course we can keep this momentum going for a while."

As he soaked in all the emotions,



(From L-R) Formula One CEO Stefano Domenicali, Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen, McLaren's Australian driver Oscar Piastri, and McLaren's British driver Lando Norris pose for a picture after the sprint race yesterday, ahead of the Qatar Formula One Grand Prix at the Lusail International Circuit. (AFP)

VERSTAPPEN FACTFILE

Date of birth: September 30, 1997
Place of birth: Hasselt, Belgium
Nationality: Dutch
Teams: Toro Rosso (2015-2016), Red Bull Racing (2016-present)
Car number: 1
Races: 180 (179 starts)
Wins: 48
Podiums: 92
Poles: 30
Fastest laps: 28
Points: 2,418
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First victory: Spain 2016
Last victory: Japan 2023
World championship record: 1st (2023), 1st (2022), 1st (2021), 3rd (2019, 2020), 4th (2018), 5th (2016), 6th (2017), 12th (2015)
Miscellaneous records:
Youngest driver to start an F1 GP: 17 years, 166 days, Australia 2015
Youngest driver to score points: 17 years, 180 days, Malaysia 2015
Youngest driver to win a race: 18 years, 228 days, Spain 2016
Youngest driver to make the podium: 18 years, 228 days, Spain 2016
Number of wins in one season: 15 (2022)
Number of consecutive wins: 10 (2023)
Most podium finishes in one season: 18 (2021)
Most points in a season: 454 (2022)
First Dutch driver to become world champion



Verstappen later went on to admit that his latest title is the "best" of the lot. "This one is the best one," Verstappen told the post-sprint press conference.

"I think the first one was the most emotional one because that's when your dreams are fulfilled in F1, but this one definitely has been my best year [with] consecutive wins and stuff like that. The car itself has probably been in the best shape as well, so for me this one is prob-

ably [what] I'm the most proud of in a way, because of consistency," he added.

His boss at the Red Bull, Christian Horner, has no doubt his star driver - dubbed as "Super Max" - will dominate F1 in the years to come. "He's the most competitive driver that I've ever met," Horner said yesterday.

"I think the determination that he drives with, the passion, the heart, the commitment and of course



Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen celebrates winning his third world title yesterday. (AFP)



Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen (centre) celebrates his third world championship title with his crew at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday. (AFP)

there's the abundance of skill that he has. He's up there with the very best, some of the greatest the sport has seen. This season has just surpassed anything we've ever seen," the Red Bull team principal added.

Horner singled out Verstappen's self-confidence to win from any position as his greatest attribute. "I just think the self-belief, there's the self-confidence he has in himself, to go

out and nail it, to go out and deliver," the Brit said when asked about Verstappen's best trait. "He's only 26, I think he's still going to get better, he's still going to evolve and I think he's still going to grow as a driver."

The son of Jos, a former journeyman Formula One driver, and Belgian world-class kart racer Sophie, Verstappen sped to multiple titles as a boy and almost won the F3 title at

his first attempt aged 15. Verstappen graduated to the F1 fast lane in 2015 with Red Bull's junior team, then known as Toro Rosso.

Aged just 17 years and 166 days, he was the youngest ever F1 driver in the sport at a time when he still had not passed his regular driving test. Eight years later and at the age of just 26, Verstappen is on course to be counted among greats.

VERSTAPPEN'S FIVE KEY RACES IN THIRD WORLD TITLE SEASON

Bahrain statement - Verstappen made an ominous statement of intent, dominating at Sakhir in early March for his maiden season opening win at the 10th attempt. He led from pole to flag, barring pitstops, with Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez 12sec behind. "They have this championship sewn up" muttered Mercedes' George Russell, prophetically.

Miami maestro - Verstappen had to work hard for his third win of the season starting from ninth on the grid after a poor qualifying. But that wasn't going to stop the driver at the top of his game behind the wheel of the redoubtable Red Bull and he powered through the field, taking just 15 laps to move into second, and the outright lead on lap 48, for a fourth 1-2 for his team.

Belgium grit - Verstappen brushed aside starting sixth after a grid penalty to put in a masterful display at Spa-Francorchamps. In a league of his own he finished a country mile - 22.305 seconds to be precise - clear of Perez. He felt so relaxed and confident he playfully bickered over the team radio with his engineer about tyre degradation and making a pit-stop to give the mechanics extra practice. His beaten rivals resorted to humour to sum up his supremacy. "He is having a smoke and a pancake," observed seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton referring to the 2002 Austin Powers film Goldmember.

Monza magic - Not even Ferrari's vociferous tifosi could silence Verstappen who, not for the first time, rewrote Formula One history with an unparalleled 10th successive win after equalling Sebastian Vettel's record of nine set in 2013 at Zandvoort in front of his home fans the weekend before. Pipped for pole at Monza by Carlos Sainz's Ferrari, Verstappen took his accustomed place at the head of the field by lap 15 to beat Perez with Sainz third.

Japan 'rocket ship' - Verstappen arrived at Suzuka after a rare blip in Singapore the previous weekend focused on resuming business as usual. From Friday's practice it was plain nothing was going to stop him

securing win number 13 for the season and the constructors championship for Red Bull. A superb qualifying session put him on pole, and he translated that into a win and the fastest lap with another flawless drive aided by the car he hailed as "a rocket ship". With his closest challenger and teammate Sergio Perez winding up with a DNF he left Japan stretching his lead to 177 points, one of the Dutchman's hands firmly on the title. One footnote for F1 statisticians - this was his 13th consecutive win from pole, surpassing Michael Schumacher's record. And he joined Schumacher and Sebastian Vettel, the only other drivers to win 13 races in one season, to put him within striking distance of bettering his own benchmark of 15 wins in 2022.

(AFP)



Red Bull Racing's Max Verstappen celebrates after winning his third world title after the sprint race ahead of the Formula 1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix at the Lusail International Circuit, yesterday. AFP

Verstappen claims third straight world title in historic sprint at Lusail Circuit

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

Max Verstappen made the historic sprint at the Lusail International Circuit (LIC) memorable. The Red Bull star sealed his third consecutive drivers' world title after finishing runner-up in the Formula 1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix sprint – the first-ever sprint to take place in the Middle East.

The 26-year-old's triumph in a "consistently dominant" season overshadowed a maiden victory for McLaren rookie Oscar Piastri, who won the 19-lap race with a time of 35:01.297secs.

"Unbelievable. Guys, I don't know what to say. It's been a pleasure so far this year," Verstappen told his teammates on radio shortly after he finished the race, 1.871secs off Piastri.

The Dutchman then stood atop his car raising three fingers for his three world crowns before he was mobbed by his team members to celebrate a remarkable victory.

Verstappen has relished a phenomenal 22-race season, winning 13 out of 16 races that include his spell of 10 straight wins, an all-time Formula 1 record.

"A fantastic feeling, it's been an incredible year. I feel super proud, but super proud of the job of the team. We'll keep on pushing but of course I'm incredibly happy at the moment," said the Dutchman.

"This title is my best of the three titles. The first one was emotional but my performance has been the best this season. I want to keep this momentum going," said Verstappen, who will start today's Qatar Grand Prix from pole position having an unassailable 184-point lead.

Needing only a sixth place finish yesterday, Verstappen was deemed to have sealed the title even before the end of the sprint as his teammate Sergio Perez, the only driver with a



FROM LEFT: Formula One CEO Stefano Domenicali, Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen, McLaren's Australian driver Oscar Piastri, McLaren's British driver Lando Norris and FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem pose for a photograph after the sprint race at the Lusail International Circuit. AFP

“This title is my best of the three titles. The first one was emotional but my performance has been the best this season. I want to keep this momentum going.”
Max Verstappen

chance to catch him in the title race, crashed out after being struck by Esteban Ocon's Alpine.

With his third world title,

2023 DRIVER STANDINGS				
POS	DRIVER	CAR	PTS	
1	Max Verstappen	Red Bull Racing Honda Rbpt	407	
2	Sergio Perez	Red Bull Racing Honda Rbpt	223	
3	Lewis Hamilton	Mercedes	194	
4	Fernando Alonso	Aston Martin Aramco Mercedes	174	
5	Carlos Sainz	Ferrari	153	
6	Charles Leclerc	Ferrari	137	
7	Lando Norris	McLaren Mercedes	121	
8	George Russell	Mercedes	120	
9	Oscar Piastri	McLaren Mercedes	65	
10	Lance Stroll	Aston Martin Aramco Mercedes	47	

including Jack Brabham, Niki Lauda, Nelson Piquet, Ayrton Senna and Jackie Stewart. The third straight title also brought him alongside Juan-Manuel

"It's been by far the most dominant so it's come as no surprise but to see Max join some of the great names he spoke about earlier he's in that bracket now. The way he's driven this year has been out of this world and I think you have to take a moment to reflect and be in the moment and everything he's done this year is phenomenal," said Red Bull boss Christian Horner.

"That's his make-up and I think he's the most competitive driver that I've ever met, the determination that he drives

with, the passion, the heart, the commitment and of course, the abundance of skill that he has. He's up there with the very best, some of the greatest the sport has seen and I think this season has just surpassed anything we've seen," he added.

Meanwhile, yesterday's sprint day was outstanding for McLaren as Lando Norris claimed third position in the sprint with Piastri being the winner after the pair had secured a team 1-2 in the sprint shootout ahead of Verstappen.

"It was a very stressful race, when all the soft guys came through at the beginning I thought we were in trouble, but then they fell away pretty quickly. I think we did a very good job. First Sprint win sounds pretty cool," said the 22-year-old Piastri.

Norris said: "First of all congrats to Oscar, and congrats to Max. First win, before mine, so well done. It was a tough fight, not the best of beginnings but a good ending. I've been trying [to win] for a long time, but Oscar has done a better job, so hats off to him."

Mercedes teammates George Russell and Lewis Hamilton claimed fourth and fifth positions respectively ahead of Ferrari's Carlos Sainz and Charles Leclerc. Alex Albon of Williams finished on eighth position while two-time champion Fernando Alonso ended on ninth position followed by Alpine's Pierre Gasly.

Meanwhile, festivities continued on the sidelines of the action-packed day as fans took part in many activities for a second consecutive day. Football legends David Beckham and Ronaldinho were present among the spectators to attend the action. The day culminated with a breathtaking performance from superstar Alesso. Global megastar Bruno Mars is set to dazzle fans after today's Grand Prix.

MAX VERSTAPPEN

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 - First Dutch driver to become world champion

RECENT FORMULA 1 WORLD CHAMPIONS	
2023:	Max Verstappen (NED) Red Bull
2022:	Max Verstappen (NED) Red Bull
2021:	Max Verstappen (NED) Red Bull
2020:	Lewis Hamilton (GBR) Mercedes
2019:	Lewis Hamilton (GBR) Mercedes
2018:	Lewis Hamilton (GBR) Mercedes
2017:	Lewis Hamilton (GBR) Mercedes
2016:	Nico Rosberg (GER) Mercedes
2015:	Lewis Hamilton (GBR) Mercedes
2014:	Lewis Hamilton (GBR) Mercedes
2013:	Sebastian Vettel (GER) Red Bull
2012:	Sebastian Vettel (GER) Red Bull
2011:	Sebastian Vettel (GER) Red Bull
2010:	Sebastian Vettel (GER) Red Bull
2009:	Jenson Button (GBR) Brawn
2008:	Lewis Hamilton (GBR) McLaren
2007:	Kimi Raikkonen (FIN) Ferrari
2006:	Fernando Alonso (ESP) Renault
2005:	Fernando Alonso (ESP) Renault



Max Verstappen (centra) celebrates with his Red Bull Racing team members after winning his third world championship. AFP