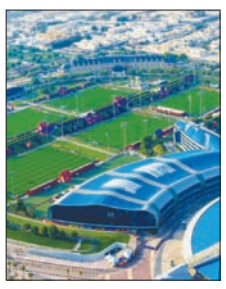
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FORMULA 1

# Piastri says 'it's nice to be back' after Qatar sprint pole

## Championship leader Norris was third fastest, while four-time champion Verstappen came sixth

**By Sahan Bidappa**
Doha




McLaren's Australian driver Oscar Piastri drives during qualifying session for the Qatar sprint race at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday. *(AFP)*

The last time Oscar Piastri stood on a podium was at the Italian Grand Prix in September. His most recent Grand Prix victory came a month earlier in the Netherlands, when he held a 34-point lead over McLaren teammate Lando Norris.

Since then, however, the Australian has endured a sharp dip in form, slipping 24 points behind Norris in the title race with just two Grands Prix remaining. But Piastri will hope to chip away at that deficit after securing pole position yesterday for the Qatar sprint race at the Lusail International Circuit.

Today, Piastri will chase a third successive sprint victory in Qatar, though it is the later qualifying session for tomorrow's Grand Prix that will ultimately determine whether the title fight carries into next weekend's season finale in Abu Dhabi. There are 58 points still available: eight in today's 100km sprint, and 25 each from the final two Grands Prix in Qatar and Abu Dhabi.

Mercedes' George Russell will line up alongside Piastri on the front row after producing another superb lap, while Norris will start third, having run into traffic on his final attempt. He began his last lap tucked up behind Williams' driver Alex Albon, costing him crucial time throughout the run.

Behind the leading trio, Fernando Alonso impressed to secure fourth. Reigning four-time champion Max Verstappen – who also trails Norris by 24 points – could manage only sixth, slotting in behind teammate Yuki Tsunoda. Verstappen complained about severe bouncing throughout qualifying and was unhappy with the set-up of his Red Bull car.

Piastri admitted it was "nice to be back" having slightly shifted momentum away from Norris in their title fight. "It's been a good day, which is nice for a change," said Piastri, a smile returning to his face. "It's been a day where things have clicked from the start, and I think the sprint qualifying session went really well. I had a pretty big moment on my lap but it was just enough in the end, so thanks to the team – it's a great car and it's looked really good this weekend so far. I'm pretty happy with that."

The other Mercedes driver, Kimi Antonelli, was seventh ahead of Williams' Carlos Sainz, while Charles Leclerc was the sole Ferrari inside the top 10 in ninth. Albon rounded out the top 10. It was another poor qualifying for Lewis Hamilton, who was knocked out in the first session, his time only good enough for 18th on the grid.

Verstappen set the early pace in the opening phase, prompting Norris to accuse him of impeding – though stewards, after reviewing the incident, opted against taking action. Norris then led phase two, ahead of Piastri, who had been quickest in the sole practice session. Piastri ultimately delivered a best lap of one minute 20.055 seconds in the final segment, 0.032 clear of Russell, whose late effort pushed Norris down to third.

Norris admitted he made an error in the final corner. "I would be stupid not to try and win, but it's impossible to overtake, so I think I will probably finish P3," he said. "Getting past George Russell on the line is probably the best I can hope for."

Norris can become Britain's 11th world champion this weekend in Qatar. To achieve it, he must simply outscore both Piastri and Verstappen by two points, ensuring he reaches Abu Dhabi with a decisive 26-point advantage. A top-six result in the sprint, paired with victory in tomorrow's Grand Prix, could allow Norris to seal the title with one race remaining.

Verstappen, meanwhile, faces a considerable challenge. His remarkable second half of the season – cutting a 104-point deficit since Zandvoort by finishing on every podium – has hauled him back into the fight, with four wins, two seconds, and two third-place finishes. Yet the Dutchman accepts that a fifth straight world championship will demand a sizeable measure of fortune. If he succeeds, it would stand among Formula One's finest comebacks.

During qualifying yesterday, Verstappen repeatedly complained that his car was "bouncing like crazy". Whether his off-track moment caused any damage remains unclear, but he was out-qualified by Tsunoda for the first time this season. The Japanese driver has already stated he will do everything possible to support Verstappen, last year's Grand Prix winner at Lusail.

Reflecting on sprint qualifying, Verstappen said: "Not good. From the first lap, just really bad bouncing and very aggressive understeer that would shift into oversteer at high speed. Just not what you want to go faster. We tried to change a few things on the wheel but it never really worked. It made it quite tricky. Clearly it wasn't working well in qualifying, so that's something we need to understand."

Verstappen will have to run the sprint with the same setup. However, once the sprint concludes, Red Bull will be allowed to adjust the car, as it will no longer be under parc ferme restrictions.



Oscar Piastri is congratulated by McLaren teammate Lando Norris after securing pole.

FOCUS

# Packed grandstands mark high-energy start to Qatar Grand Prix



Lusail International Circuit (LIC) set the tone for an electrifying weekend as the Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix kicked off yesterday. With an action-packed schedule featuring practice sessions, Sprint qualifying, and a host of off-track activities, fans of all ages filled the grandstands throughout the day.

The interactive Fan Zone was buzzing with activity as attendees explored food stalls, games, experiences, and merchandise, creating a lively and unforgettable atmosphere. Fans also had the chance to meet drivers and team managers during the Fan Forum, where exclusive merchandise was distributed – offering attendees an once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Adding to the race weekend experience, Paddock Club guests enjoyed an exclusive Pit Lane Walk, gaining unparalleled access to team garages and behind-the-scenes action. The excitement continued with a Paddock Club



Track Tour, providing a guided lap of the circuit and unique insights into the challenges drivers face on track. Off-track entertainment included a soulful performance by British singer Seal at the Lusail Live Stage, further delighting fans.

Today promises even more thrills with the Sprint race, highlighting Qatar as one of only six venues selected by F1 to host this high-octane format in 2025. The 100km sprint race, which requires no mandatory pit stops, is expected to deliver intense wheel-to-wheel action under the lights.

Circuit gates open at 1:30pm today. Complimentary Metro passes can be redeemed by the Ticket holders at the Goldclub office at any Doha Metro station or selected Lusail Tram stations. The Doha Metro will operate extended hours from 5am to 1:30am, with shuttle services running from Lusail QNB Station to the circuit.