FLYING START FOR (ONE) FERRARI
Leclerc on top, Verstappen unhappy with stablemate

Mexico City, Friday October 30 - Charles Leclerc underlined Ferrari's status as favorites to win this weekend by topping both practice sessions on the opening day of the 2026 Formula I Mexico City Grand Prix at the Autódromo Hermanos Rodriguez, which welcomed 102,122 fans.

The 29-year-old Monaco driver, who questioned his team's 'favorite' status before the day began, set a fastest time of 1 minute 17.827 seconds to edge out McLaren's Lando Norris - winner here last year - by 0.103s in the second session at the 4.404-km circuit.

The session's main incident was a tangle between stablemates Max Verstappen in the Red Bull and Liam Lawson of Racing Bulls. As Verstappen tried to force his way past into Turn 15 Lawson resisted, the two clashed, spread debris on the track and brought out a Red Flag to halt proceedings.

Asked if it was just an unlucky moment, five-time Mexico winner Verstappen said: "I don't think it's unlucky, maybe not very smart behavior. At the end of the day it's not going to change my weekend. But if I would be him, maybe I would act a little bit smarter." Verstappen had to complete the hour with a damaged floor.

While Leclerc was flying, his team-mate Lewis Hamilton was grounded: the two-time AHR winner got on the radio to say, 'Something's wrong, I lost all power through Turn 13,' halfway through the session. He was immediately told to stop the #44 car with suspected power unit problems, to be confirmed when the team got the Ferrari back to the garage.

George Russell, who earlier this weekend admitted that Mercedes team-mate Kimi Antonelli has been 'on a different level' for most of this season, got the better of the young Italian to finish third, with Verstappen and Red Bull partner Isack Hadjar next up. Hadjar complained of 'the biggest bottoming of all time' near the end of a difficult hour.

Checo unwell, excused duties

Speaking of favorites, Sergio Pérez had a mixed day to kick off the weekend that brings his 300th Grand Prix. Only the seventh F1 driver to reach that landmark, Checo ran as high as 12th before slipping back to 18th overall on a day when he reported feeling unwell and was excused all media duties. He has also been rewarded with a three-year contract extension at Cadillac and will hope for better on-track moments over the rest of the weekend.

All change for Mexico City! Fans see new faces on show

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Earlier in the day, Free Practice 1 allowed Mexican fans another opportunity to run the rule over the up-and-coming F1 drivers when no fewer than 10 of the 11 teams chose to use a 'third driver' to gain experience at the wheel of the new-generation cars.

The only exceptions were Ferrari, for whom Leclerc topped the session with a time of 1:18.128, a quarter of a second faster than the corresponding time last year - also set by Leclerc - and a rare occurrence with this new generation of F1 cars.

Meanwhile Hamilton, puzzled by his Ferrari's handling, began the session with a dramatic aero-rake device behind its front wheels in a bid to get to the bottom of the issue, ending the opening hour in fourth place.

Best of the stand-in drivers was 24-year-old Dane Frederik Vesti, who took over Russell's Mercedes and was a highly creditable third in the session, only 0.074s behind title-chasing Antonelli and 0.733 short of Leclerc.

Vesti underlined the importance of these sessions to the crop of young drivers coming through. "Obviously we all have the dream of being on the grid in F1,'"he said. "These sessions are a real opportunity to showcase what you can do."

Vesti's reward came at the end of the hour when the team took the shackles off and let him go for a time. "They were happy for me to explore the limits," he added. "The main thing is the trust the team placed in me."

Another stand-out was Japan's Ayumu Isawa, the 25-year-old Super Formula champion finishing fifth in Verstappen's Red Bull. But the sheer physical challenge these third drivers face was underlined when Bulgarian teenager Nikola Tsolov, in Liam Lawson's Racing Bulls, could scarcely move his right leg as he tried to get out of the cockpit.

The combination of low grip, thin air and a largely resurfaced track tested the drivers' feel for braking, with multiple lock-ups, especially into Turn 1, while there were bigger issues for 18-year-old Briton Freddie Slater in his F1 debut for Audi , managing only a handful of laps, and American Jak Crawford, whose Aston Martin had to stop out on track.

Colton Herta, the 26-year-old American being touted as a possible replacement for Valtteri Bottas in the Cadillac line-up, got 30 laps' practice but ended the session in last place, 3.237 seconds off Leclerc's front-running pace.

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