

FORMULA ONE Sydney bid for Aussie GP

AFP, Sydney

Sydney authorities on Saturday laid out plans to lure the Australian Grand Prix from "arrogant" Melbourne, sparking a fierce spat between the rival cities.

The Sydney-based New South Wales state government said initial costings were already underway for hosting a night race, most likely at 2000 Olympic site Homebush, from 2015.

"I've already started to make contact with the F1 promoters, we're already having a good look at the facilities and infrastructure that we have available for such an event," said major events minister Ian MacDonald.

"They can rest assured down in Melbourne that they're going to have a hard time, they haven't got this event to themselves.

"They're complacent, they're somewhat arrogant and we believe we can offer a night grand prix, which is something the promoters we know need to service their European viewership."

His Melbourne counterpart Tim Holding responded angrily to the announcement, calling the New South Wales authority "the nation's biggest blowhards".



German driver Sebastian Vettel speeds his Red Bull Racing through a corner during the Australian Grand Prix qualifying session in Melbourne on Saturday. (Inset) Vettel gestures number one after setting the fastest time to clinch the pole position for the race. PHOTOS: AFP

Barcelona honour Cruyff

AFP, Barcelona

Former Holland and Barcelona great Johan Cruyff was on Friday named honorary president of the Spanish and European champions, club spokesman said.

The appointment, which "carries no executive responsibilities", was approved by Barcelona chairman Joan Laporta, said the spokesman, Joan Oliver.

"The board considered that Cruyff meets all the requirements, both as a player and coach and as an inspirational person and the founder of a model that has led to successes in recent years," he said.

Cruyff, 62, a three-time European Footballer of the Year, started his career as a teenager at Ajax before going on to enjoy huge success with Barca, whom he then coached to the 1992 European Cup and four straight league titles between 1991 and 1994.

Last November, he took over as coach of the Catalonia regional team in Spain.

Vettel in pole again

AFP, Melbourne



Sebastian Vettel has vowed to complete some unfinished business for Red Bull-Renault after Saturday snaring a second consecutive pole position for the Australian Grand Prix.

Vettel claimed the pole in Bahrain a fortnight ago, but subsequently finished fourth behind Ferrari's Fernando Alonso in the season-opening Grand Prix after leading for most of the race.

The German claimed his seventh career pole when he nudged out his teammate Mark Webber by 0.116sec to set up an all Red Bull front row on the race grid for Sunday's 58-lap Australian GP on the Albert Park circuit in Melbourne.

"We didn't really get the job done in Bahrain so we will try to do it here," Vettel said.

Vettel, who is bidding for his sixth GP victory in 45 starts, clocked a fastest lap in the third and final qualifying stage of one minute 23.919 seconds.

The 22-year-old German is expecting an incident-packed race on the bumpy street circuit in contrast to the predictability of the Bahrain race.

"This circuit has a nature that there is more action than probably in Bahrain," he said.

"There are more things happening, the circuit is not that long so you might have more situations with lapping cars which can always be a dangerous situation for all."

"We will have more excitement tomorrow, just because of the circuit and it's a bit

closer (teams) here than in Bahrain and we don't know what the weather will be at race time."

Webber said he was not daunted by the prospect of trying to win his home GP at the ninth attempt after some frustrating failures since 2002.

"Not really because tomorrow's newspapers will be wrapped in fish and chips on Monday, they're very fickle

1. Sebastian Vettel (GER/Red Bull-Renault) 1:23.919
2. Mark Webber (AUS/Red Bull-Renault) 1:24.035
3. Fernando Alonso (ESP/Ferrari) 1:24.111
4. Jenson Button (GBR/McLaren-Mercedes) 1:24.675
5. Felipe Massa (BRA/Ferrari) 1:24.837
6. Nico Rosberg (GER/Mercedes) 1:24.884
7. Michael Schumacher (GER/Mercedes) 1:24.927
8. Rubens Barrichello (BRA/Williams-Cosworth) 1:25.217
9. Robert Kubica (POL/Renault) 1:25.372
10. Adrian Sutil (GER/Force India-Mercedes) 1:26.036

and they think this is the only race of the season for the people down here," Webber told a reporter.

"I have a much bigger thing in mind, a good result tomorrow and of course I'm keen to do well here but every Grand Prix is a very respectful thing to take part in and whichever race I'm in I always do my best."

Ferrari's two-time world champion Alonso of Spain was third fastest and will start on the second row of the grid alongside reigning world champion Jenson Button in a McLaren Mercedes.

"I am confident for tomorrow's race, but all three of us (top qualifiers) know this is a very long race with the many things that happen here and it's not clear whether it will be a dry track, so anything can happen," Alonso said.

Ferrari teammate Felipe Massa was fifth quickest just ahead of German Mercedes GP driver Nico Rosberg.

Seven-time world champion Michael Schumacher in a Mercedes GP will start on the fourth row of the grid alongside Brazilian Rubens Barrichello.

"I would guess the ranking reflects the situation well and our performance is probably the maximum for our car at the moment," Schumacher said.

"We still have a lot in hand for tomorrow's race, and I am on the clean side of the grid for the start."

The shock failure in the qualifying session was former world champion Lewis Hamilton, who missed out on the final stage of qualifying.

The British McLaren Mercedes driver was 11th fastest in the second qualifying stage in 1:25.184 and missed out on the top 10 cars into the third and final stage by 0.062secs.

"I just didn't have the grip in the tyres in qualifying. I feel I got everything out of the car," Hamilton said. "Hopefully, tomorrow we'll have a better race."

Maradona will let Messi shine

THE GUARDIAN

The Argentina coach, Diego Maradona, has said he is prepared to change the team's tactics for Lionel Messi to shine at the World Cup in South Africa this summer. The Barcelona forward has hit new heights for his club in recent weeks but has often struggled for the national side under the former world player of the year Maradona.

However, Maradona has now said that the team may have to work around Messi in South Africa, and not the other way around. "If I had to change for his good, I'd change,"

"But I think that with the system we have and the players we have all he needs is to explode, and surely he will do that at the World Cup."

After his return from a tour of Europe to see his leading players, Maradona said he had "the most emotional conversation" with Messi since he met him.

"I saw a Messi totally convinced of what he wants. We believe in him to the death," said Maradona. "He's not Lio any more, he's Messi. He has rights he's earned on the pitch and he'll have to make his leadership felt on it."

Messi scored hat-tricks in successive La Liga games recently against Real Zaragoza and Valencia and is earning comparisons with some of the greatest players to play the game, including Maradona himself. "If anyone surpasses me I want him to be Argentine. If Messi does well, I win," said Maradona.

SA seizes \$6m fake jerseys

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa has seized more than six million dollars worth of fake World Cup merchandise, with many of the goods originating from China and other Asian countries, a newspaper said Saturday.

Customs authorities have seized 46 million rand (6.1 million dollars, 4.6 million euros) in fakes over the last six months, including about 20 million rand worth of copycat jerseys for South Africa's national side Bafana Bafana, the Saturday Star reported.

"Most of the merchandise has been seized at Durban harbour and OR Tambo International Airport" in Johannesburg, FIFA lawyer Mohamed Khader told the paper.

"Several consignments and containers have been coming in from the East," he added.

South African Football Association spokesman Mario Sanyane said Adidas was contracted to produce Bafana's official jerseys.

"It's unacceptable that people from around the world are taking advantage of the Bafana brand," he said.

Fergie still gets nervous

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson admits he still gets nervous during title run-ins despite having spent almost a quarter of a century at Old Trafford.

Ferguson, 68, took over at United in 1986 and is battling Chelsea and Arsenal for a record fourth straight Premier League title, which would take his tally of English championships to 12.

Yet the veteran manager claims he will always feel anxiety before his team's matches no matter how experienced he is. And he feels that even the managers that seem calm on the outside are struggling with inner turmoil.

"You still get keyed up for games and it's part of it. It's that time when players are doing their warm-up that you're on your own in a sense and your staff are

away doing their jobs," Ferguson said.

"It's alright at home matches because you're in your office but away from home you're killing time, walking about or sitting in the dressing room."

"We're all the same, whether you're top of the league or bottom of the league, that's what football does to you."

"If it wasn't that way we're all in the wrong job. I think it tells you, you still care about the game."

"Managers are the subject to that more than anyone, that uncertainty, the anxiety, apprehension about every game you play in, simply because the result is important to you."

"Some people are quite relaxed about the game and don't show great emotions but they still care."

"Deep down you're probably turning inside out the same as the rest of us because that's what the game does to you."

"The thing for managers is the win, lose, draw situation. You aim to win and

you can't lose too many or you lose your job. There's no-one more directly responsible for results as the manager."

"We're all subject to winning games or we're on the dole (unemployment) line."

The Scot remains as forthright as ever and only this season has been punished for outspoken criticism of referee Alan Wiley, has hit out at neighbours Manchester City and was involved in a heated touchline row with Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez.

He saw the midweek fracas involving Manchester City's Roberto Mancini and Everton's David Moyes as further evidence of the pressure that managers are under.

He added: "Mancini wanted to rush the game and Davey was 2-0 up and it would have been interesting if he'd kept the ball for a second or two longer!"

"The good thing was that Roberto apologised which was big and they had a glass of wine after."

SL president offers help to Beckham

Football

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president has offered the services of his spiritual healer and personal physician to help injured footballer David Beckham get back on the field within three days.

Eliyantha Lindsay White, 37, President Mahinda Rajapakse's personal physician, told AFP that the former England captain had been invited for treatment involving "faith and ayurveda."

An official at the president's office said it had sent an invitation to Beckham to visit the island for traditional treatment after a string of Indian sports stars claimed they were helped by White.

"I am ready to treat him," White said. "His condition can be easily treated and within three days he will be able to go back to playing."

Doctors have ruled out Beckham playing for several months after the player ruptured his Achilles tendon earlier this month.

"His case is simple. I can treat him. He can

play again," said White, who claims he has special "powers" that he uses, blended with traditional ayurvedic treatment practised in Sri Lanka and neighbouring India.

Star Indian batsman Sachin Tendulkar hit a record double century against South Africa last month and publicly thanked Rajapakse for giving him the services of White to treat him for a knee injury.

White has since treated three more Indian cricket players, including opening batsman Gautam Gambhir and left-arm bowler Ashish Nehra who travelled to Colombo last week for treatment by White.

White, who says he has had "special powers" since the age of 12, studied traditional medicine.

He then began treating thousands of patients using medicinal herbs from India, the seat of ayurveda, an ancient healing practice that includes medicines, meditation and diets practised on the Indian subcontinent.

White has worked as Rajapakse's personal physician since 2005. He says he does not charge for his services, but the request for treatment must come from the president.

Benitez urges Gerrard

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez is urging Steven Gerrard to use Sunday's clash with Sunderland at Anfield to rediscover his form and get the Reds' season back on track.

England midfielder Gerrard has been well short of his best for most of this season due to a hamstring problem and Liverpool's failure to gel as a unit during a dismal campaign.

"They were expected to push for the Premier League title this season but Benitez's side, currently four points behind fourth placed Tottenham, have already lost 10 games and have ambitions no loftier than snatching the last Champions League qualification place.

Tottenham, Manchester City and Aston Villa are all closing in on a top four finish as they look to end the dominance of the traditional 'big four' and Benitez wants Gerrard back to his best to help his side fend off those other sides.

"I think more or less in terms of his position and his movement it is similar to previous seasons," he said. "The team has had some

problems and some players are suffering because we are not giving them too many good balls or options."

"But Gerrard is an important player because he also has to create something for the rest of the team and he knows he has to improve."

"But the main thing for me - and we have had conversations with the team - is that everyone knows we have to improve."

"He is one of the players who is really focused and has a great determination. That is the first thing; if you want to improve you have to believe you can do it and work hard trying to do it."

The last time these sides met in October, Liverpool were sunk by a Darren Bent goal that beat goalkeeper Pepe Reina courtesy of a huge deflection off a beach ball that had been thrown onto the Stadium of Light pitch by a Liverpool fan.

It was one of the most remarkable and bizarre goals in recent memories, and not something Benitez chooses to dwell upon.

"That was a bad decision but we have moved forward," he added. "I think Sunderland have been playing well recently and it will be a physical and difficult game."

Sunderland manager Steve Bruce is ready to restore Lorik

Cana to the midfield after the captain could only make the bench on his return from suspension in the 1-1 midweek draw at Aston Villa.

Kenwyne Jones, a January transfer target for Benitez, is also pushing for a start after missing the last two games with a hip problem.

Paulo Da Silva, the Paraguayan defender, is set to come in at centre-back for the injury-prone John Mensah, who is struggling with a knee problem.

The Wearside club are aiming for a top half finish after emerging from a disastrous three-and-a-half month run without a victory and they have lost just once in their last nine games.

However, Sunderland are winless on the road since the opening day of the season and Bruce has hinted at springing a tactical surprise in a bid to earn the club's first victory at Anfield in more than a quarter of a century.

Bruce said: "I had something in my mind."

"I know they're not in the top four, but at Anfield it's always a stiff task as it's a venue steeped in history and tradition. They've got excellent players and whenever you go there you know what you're up against."



Bordeaux players do warm up exercises during a training session at the Stade de France in Paris on Friday. PHOTO: AFP

IN BRIEF

Jansen's WC hopes in doubt

AFP, Hamburg

Germany international midfielder Marcell Jansen revealed Friday that his World Cup hopes are in doubt after picking up a left foot injury training with his team Hamburg.

The 24-year-old suffered ligament damage that could require surgery.

"Such an injury at this time of the season is a hard blow because we're going to play some important games and because the World Cup in South Africa is a big objective," Jansen told the club's website.

Jansen, who has 30 caps, has suffered from a string of injuries in the past two seasons but had hoped to make it to South Africa after featuring in the 2006 tournament at home.

Spurs snap up Sandro

AFP, London

Tottenham completed the signing of highly-rated young Brazilian midfielder Sandro from Internacional on Friday.

Sandro's move had been expected for several days and he finally signed for the Premier League club after passing a medical.

The 21-year-old will move to England at the end of the season once he has finished playing for Internacional in the Copa Libertadores.

Spurs boss Harry Redknapp, whose side are chasing a place in the Champions League, believes he has signed a major talent.

"He is an outstanding young player who we feel has a great future," Redknapp told Tottenham's website.