Saudi Arabian GP: Lewis Hamilton revels on 'incredibly fast' Jeddah debut to lead from the front on key weekend

Lewis Hamilton said he enjoyed driving the "rapid" Jeddah street track for the first time after topping the opening day at the Saudi Arabian GP, but Red Bull also felt cause for optimism heading into what they have described as "two cup finals" to settle an astonishingly close and tense title duel.

The championship battles that have turned this year into one of the sport's greatest seasons in recent memory will finally be settled over the next nine days, with 2021's drivers' and constructors' champions to be crowned.

Verstappen has a first mathematical chance to clinch the drivers' crown, as do Mercedes with the constructors', this weekend but the higher likelihood remains that both championships will go down to the wire in Abu Dhabi next week.

Unless that is if Formula 1's newest venue and its 3.8-mile wall-lined layout catches out any of the leading contenders.

On the banks of the Red Sea, the track features an array of lightning-fast corners, flat-out straights and blind apexes. Sky Sports F1's Martin Brundle described it on Friday as being like "Silverstone with Monaco's walls".

"A lot of grip as well. If you can get the rhythm, it's beautiful to drive."

One concern though was that the vast closing speeds witnessed in the approach to the lap's final corner between drivers warming up for hot laps and those finishing them at full speed.

"But the closing speed on other cars is definitely getting to a bit of a danger zone."

Hamilton topped both sessions; narrowly so from Verstappen in the opening day-time one before the Dutchman slipped to fourth in the floodlit hour of night-time running. Trailing his Dutch rival in the standings, a victory is more imperative for Hamilton this weekend.

Lewis Hamilton tops both of Friday's practice sessions on F1's first day on Jeddah's street track

"We're not rapid on a single lap I would say compared to the others, but my long-race pace seemed like it was not too bad. So who knows what's going on.

"It's definitely not in a bad place. Over a single lap they're quite quick, so we've got a bit of work to do."

In a season where the performance pendulum has swung regularly between Mercedes and Red Bull, pre-event predictions have regularly proved incorrect. Mercedes have duly been installed as the big favourites for Jeddah, but Christian Horner saw Friday signs of encouragement for Red Bull.

"The circuit's a little bit tighter than the data suggested," Horner told Sky F1.

"The corners are a little bit together. So it's not all the emphasis on horsepower we thought it was going to be. So that's encouraging and, you can see, there's a tenth or two between the two cars, between the drivers.

"On this type of circuit you can find that and that's really encouraging for that."

Eight points ahead in the drivers' title race with Verstappen and five points behind Mercedes in the fight to be the teams' champion, Red Bull remain in a strong position and Horner said Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi were now "like two cup finals".

"I think you've just got to go for it," said the Briton of a team aiming for their first title since 2013.

Tosin Adarabioyo's late equaliser keeps Cottagers top of the Championship

Fulham clung onto top spot in the Sky Bet Championship after coming from behind to hold second-placed Bournemouth to a thrilling 1-1 draw at Craven Cottage.

Marco Silva's side dominated proceedings in the first half and could easily have gone into the dressing room two or three ahead, but it was the visitors who struck first, when Dominic Solanke fired in seconds after the restart (46).

That equaliser denied Cherries boss Scott Parker a winning return to south west London six months after his departure. With both teams recording a third draw in succession, they remain in first and second spot, separated by just a point.

Despite the fact they had been held to draws by Derby and Preston in the last two games, which had ended a run of seven straight wins, Fulham had climbed above Bournemouth into top spot - and it was immediately clear they were, by no means, prepared to vacate it.

Adam Smith registered the game's first real chance when he hit a low shot at Marek Rodak after a direct run from Emiliano Marcondes, but soon Fulham began to turn the screw and looked particularly threatening on the left, with Neeskens Kebano forcing two strong saves from Cherries goalkeeper Mark Travers.

The experienced Gary Cahill then blocked a shot from Fabio Carvalho after a short pass from Mitrovic, before the hosts had a penalty appeal turned down by referee Tim Robinson, when Harry Wilson was caught by Solanke, though the Welshman's overly theatrical reaction did his cause no favours.

Right on the stroke of half-time, there was a display of sheer bravery from Bournemouth skipper Steve Cook, who put his body on the line twice in a matter of seconds to first deny Mitrovic and then Carvalho seconds later.

Craven Cottage - which is still only populated on three sides, due to construction of the new Riverside Stand - was stunned into silence as the second half got under way. Intricate build-up caught Fulham off-guard, with Solanke able to emphatically fire past Rodak after he was located by a smart ball from Philip Billing.

The introduction of Tom Cairney and Bobby Decordova-Reid undoubtedly gave Fulham the spark they needed to rescue something late on. The former found Mitrovic, who looked despondent as another header failed to hit the back of the net, before threading the ball through for Kebano, who drew Travers from his line to make a crucial save.

Travers was then called into action to deny the Serbian frontman with a stunning one-handed save, but just when it looked as though it wasn't going to be Fulham's day, Cairney whipped in another sumptuous ball, which Adarabioyo glanced home to keep the Cottagers top of the pile.

Bournemouth's captain Steve Cook put his body on the line twice to stop Fulham from scoring.

Without that stunning double block from the Bournemouth captain, the Cherries may not have even taken so much as a point from the game in the capital. It sent the teams in level at the break, which no doubt gave the visitors the confidence to burst out of the traps afterwards and quieten the home threat that had been so prominent beforehand.

Fulham's Marco Silva: "I think anyone can see that we clearly deserved more. During the 95 minutes, we were the best team on the pitch, the team that created and had more chances to score. There were some very good saves from the goalkeeper.

We knew before the match it would be a tough one and I have to say that I am proud of my players.

"For one second we lost the focus, discipline and organisation and they punished us. At this level, you cannot concede a goal like that; I think our backline slept completely in that moment. After the first half, we knew they would be dangerous from counter-attacks because we would be on the front foot.

The way we reacted, I'm really proud, because it's not easy to play against a very good side. We never gave up and we score, but we had so many chances."

Bournemouth boss Scott Parker was full of praise for his sides draw away from home against his former club Fulham.

Bournemouth's Scott Parker: "I'm really pleased and I'm proud of my team. There's no denying we have had it difficult over the last couple of weeks with injuries - there were four or five players out there with one day's training and I'm very proud of the team, to be quite honest. There are bits of our game we need to improve but tonight, in terms of the circumstances we find ourselves in currently, nothing but pride for the team and the players.

"Hopefully now, in the next couple of weeks, we can get more training in the boys that have been injured and are coming back, and some more back from injury as well."

Tennis stars hail WTA stand against China over Peng Shuai

Top tennis players have backed women's world tennis organisation's move to suspend its tournaments in China over concern for Peng Shuai, who accused a former Communist Party leader of sexual assault.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC), which held a second video call with the Chinese player, has faced criticism for its handling of the situation amid concerns about the player's safety.

The Women's Tennis Association's (WTA) made the decision over what its chairman Steve Simon called enduring "serious doubts" about the safety of Peng.

Simon reiterated his calls for China to conduct "a full and transparent investigation – without censorship" into Peng's claim that former Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli "forced" her into sex.

The WTA's move to suspend its tournaments in China, including Hong Kong, won the backing of some of the biggest names in tennis, including men's number one Novak Djokovic and women's tour founder Billie Jean King.

The decision could potentially cost the WTA hundreds of millions of dollars because China is one of its biggest markets.

Djokovic called the WTA's stance "very bold and very courageous", while 12-time Grand Slam singles winner King tweeted that the WTA was "on the right side of history".

Tennis great Martina Navratilova challenged the IOC to respond, writing on Twitter that "so far I can barely hear you!!!"

China will host the Beijing Winter Olympics in February.

The IOC, whose president Thomas Bach spoke to Peng for 30 minutes on November 21 in one of the first contacts that a Western organisation had with her, said it had held a second call on Wednesday.

The call had confirmed that Peng "appeared to be safe and well, given the difficult situation she is in", the IOC said.

Bach faced criticism after the first call for failing to make demands about Peng's safety and the IOC defended its approach in a statement on Thursday.

"We are using 'quiet diplomacy' which, given the circumstances and based on the experience of governments and other organisations, is indicated to be the most promising way to proceed effectively in such humanitarian matters," the IOC said.

But the uncertainty over Peng has reignited calls for a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Games over China's human rights record.

"In good conscience, I don't see how I can ask our athletes to compete there when Peng Shuai is not allowed to communicate freely and has seemingly been pressured to contradict her allegation of sexual assault," Simon said.

Michael Caster, a human rights activist, expressed praise for the WTA for what he said were its efforts to combat China's attempts to cover up the incident.

"The fact that the Women's Tennis Association has shown more credibility than the International Olympic Committee or for that matter more credibility than Interpol in resisting these types of clearly scripted and coerced performances from China is shocking," Caster told Al Jazeera.

"It shows how far we need to go still. The fact that the IOC or Interpol have been turned into tools for China's propaganda whereas the WTO has resisted it really is a mark for the WTA."

The Chinese Tennis Association on Thursday expressed "indignation and firm opposition" to the WTA's announcement, state-owned newspaper Global Times reported.

And Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said the country was "firmly opposed to acts politicising sport".

The 35-year-old Peng, a doubles champion at Wimbledon and the French Open, has been at the centre of international concern for the past month.

She was not seen for weeks following her allegations on the Twitter-like Weibo platform that Zhang, now in his 70s, coerced her into sex during a years-long on-off relationship.

Her allegations, posted on November 2, were quickly scrubbed from the internet in China and online discussions about them remain censored. Zhang has not responded.

The Global Times on Thursday accused the WTA in an editorial posted only on Twitter of "an exaggerated show" and "forcing [Peng] to complain in accordance with the imagination and expectations of Western public opinion."

Peng's claims against Zhang were the first time China's #Me-Too movement has touched the highest echelons of the ruling Communist Party.

State media have pointed to an email attributed to Peng and photos of her at a Beijing tennis event as evidence of her safety.

Simon said he still had "serious doubts that she is free, safe, and not subject to censorship, coercion, and intimidation".

The European Union, the United Nations, the United States and the United Kingdom have all called for proof of Peng's whereabouts and wellbeing. **aljazeera**

Yorkshire director of cricket Martyn Moxon, first team coach Andrew Gale and coaching staff leave club after racism scandal

Director of cricket Martyn Moxon and head coach Andrew Gale have left Yorkshire along with the county's entire coaching team.

Yorkshire say the total number of departures is 16, including six members of the backroom medical team provided by Pavilion Physiotherapy Clinic, and that an interim medical team is in the process of being appointed.

Moxon had been signed off from work due to a stress-related illness while Gale had been suspended pending a disciplinary hearing since November 9 as the fallout continues in the wake of the Azeem Rafiq racism investigation.

Gale says he will take legal action over his dismissal, telling BBC Sport in a statement: "The decision has come as a surprise to me.

"The players knew about it before I did and I will be fighting the decision legally."

Chair of Yorkshire County Cricket Club, Lord Patel, said: "Significant change is required at Yorkshire County Cricket Club and we are committed to taking whatever action is necessary to regain trust.

"The decisions announced today were difficult to make, but are in the best interests of the club. Without making important changes to how we are run, we cannot move on from the past to become a culture which is progressive and inclusive.

"We want to make Yorkshire County Cricket Club a place for everyone, from all backgrounds. To do this, we need to rebuild our culture and instil positive values in everyone associated with Yorkshire. We are determined to learn from the mistakes of the past to become a club which people can trust.

Grizzlies clobber Thunder by 73 to set record for largest NBA win

The Memphis Grizzlies have smashed the National Basketball Association (NBA) record for margin of victory, clobbering the hapless Oklahoma City Thunder 152-79.

Thursday's 73-point win easily topped the previous mark, which was The Cleveland Cavaliers' 68-point spread over the Miami Heat, 148-80, on December 17, 1991.

Memphis – who were without their best player, injured all-star guard Ja Morant – used 12 players and nine of them reached double figures in scoring, with Jaren Jackson Jr's 27 points leading the way.

With the score at halftime being 72-36, the Grizzlies just kept adding to the lead, eventually pulling ahead by as many as 78 points. It was the largest lead in any NBA game since 1996-97.

The Grizzlies set a franchise record for shooting, making 62.5 percent from the field. They were also 52.8 per cent from the three-point range. Reserves De'Anthony Melton scored 19 points, Santi Aldama had 18 and John Konchar added 17 for the Grizzlies.

"Man, it feels great," Melton said after the game. "It feels great to be in the history books, especially in front of our home crowd.

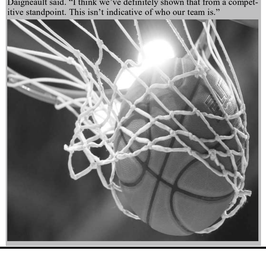
"We did it one through 15. Everybody contributed."

Taylor Jenkins, the Memphis coach, said: "Franchise records are obviously great. Proud of our guys that they don't think about that.

"We're just motivated by what are our standards every single night. Tonight was on pretty full display both offensively and defensively."

The lowly Thunder now have the records for the largest road loss and the largest home loss in league history. In May, they were beaten at home by 57 points by the Indiana Pacers.

"Tonight is not necessarily who we are." Thunder coach Mark Daigneault said. "I think we've definitely shown that from a competitive standpoint. This isn't indicative of who our team is."



Tiger Woods: Will he ever return to PGA Tour action? Why competing again would be an absolute miracle

As golfers and golf fans, we've been very lucky to live in the Tiger Woods era. The way he played, the way he carried himself and the way he dominated people was just amazing.

He had something about him that made people - even the world's best - feel inferior and that they couldn't even do what they normally could when up against him. To win 15 majors and be world No 1 for 13 years was unbelievable.

I don't think anyone will ever bring that amount of excitement to the game again. Who's to say that if he had remained fit throughout his career, regardless of what was going on in his personal life, that he couldn't have surpassed Jack Nicklaus' major tally of 18?

I think the idea of Woods coming back to play full-time was something that nobody would have expected, so for him to say that he might be able to play a few tournaments a year is nothing short of an absolute miracle.

The fact that he's even up walking now, in a position to chip, putt and hit a few shots, is amazing anyway. I spoke to numerous players at the Tour Championship a couple of months ago, people that had seen the extent of his injuries, and they questioned how he would come back from this.

Woods is just so resilient, he's so dogged, and is quite simply a one off. He's now got himself back in a position where he thinks he might be able to play some golf, which is more than we could have hoped for a few months ago.