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SILVER ARROWS FLY AGAIN AS HAMILTON TAKES POLE

Pérez and Gutiérrez left with work to do

Lewis Hamilton's fight to retain the Drivers' World Championship continued when the Mercedes driver took a superb pole position at the Autódromo Hermanos Rodríguez on Saturday afternoon.

Hamilton was two-tenths of a second faster than teammate and title race leader Nico Rosberg as the Silver Arrows claimed their 18th pole and their 11th front row lock-out of 2016, giving the 31-year-old Briton the 59th pole of his F1 career and the perfect platform for a race win tomorrow.

Hamilton's 10th pole of 2016, which he set on the Supersoft Pirelli tyres, took 1 minute 18.704 seconds, a full three-quarters of a second faster than Rosberg's pole-winning time from 2015. 'I turned up to do the job – I'm trying to do the same as I did last weekend,' said Hamilton, who won from pole in Texas last time out. 'So far it's all gone well!'

It had not been going well for Rosberg until his final flying lap put him on the front row for the 25th time in succession. Congratulated on finding speed at the right moment, Rosberg said: 'Two-and-a-half tenths quicker – Lewis's lap was brilliant, not mine! But I'm on the front row and I'm relatively pleased with that. As we've seen this season, pole position isn't everything on Sundays so for sure there are still opportunities.'

Meanwhile Mexican favourites Sergio Pérez and Esteban Gutiérrez both have work to do after finishing the one-hour qualifying session in 12th and 17th positions respectively. Force India's Pérez was eliminated in Q2, the middle segment of the hour, while Gutiérrez in the Haas spun in the last minute of Q1 and also forced teammate Romain Grosjean into avoiding action.

'It's been quite a challenging weekend for us,' Gutiérrez admitted. 'Heading into qualifying, we knew it wasn't going to be easy, but I really gave it my best. I was driving over the limit trying to put everything together for the team and for the fans – they have been incredible. They've made a huge difference to our motivation and I really want to thank them all.'

Checo is convinced a good Sunday is still possible. 'I'm optimistic we can recover some positions in the race with a strong strategy,' he said. 'Unfortunately I made a small mistake on my final lap, which ended my chance of qualifying inside the top ten. I just locked up the front tyres going into turn one and ran wide. I apologise for the mistake, but I hope I can give all my fans some happiness in the race tomorrow.'

Behind the Mercedes pair are Red Bull's Max Verstappen and Daniel Ricciardo, the Australian surprised by their performance. 'Four-tenths of a second – I don't know how we're so close to pole,' he admitted. 'I thought it was pretty terrible – the car was a handful. Bit lucky.'

Luck or no luck, the Red Bulls may have the edge when the red lights go out: the top ten drivers start on the tyres with which they set their time in Q2, and Ricciardo and Verstappen both opted for Supersofts while Hamilton and Rosberg were on Softs. The 890-metre sprint to Turn 1 will be interesting, to say the least.

While Checo struggled, the other Nico – Hülkenberg, his Force India teammate – was the star of the session after putting his car into an outstanding fifth place, almost a second faster than the Mexican and ahead of the two Ferraris of Kimi Raikkonen and Sebastian Vettel.

That effort gives Force India the upper hand as they battle for fourth place in the Constructors' Championship with Williams, for whom Valtteri Bottas and Felipe Massa were eighth and ninth respectively.

Toro Rosso's Carlos Sainz rounded out the top 10, while his Spanish compatriot Fernando Alonso was delighted to finish 11th. 'Yes, perfect!' he yelled, as it means his McLaren is the first of the cars which have a free choice of tyres to start the 71-lap race.

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