Line of sight

With Mercedes winning 11 of the first 15 Grand Prix in the 2026 F1 World Championship – and Italian Kimi Antonelli taking the chequered flag in eight of those races, it looks a tall order for anyone to stop him winning a maiden title, but stranger things have happened

If Kimi Antonelli wins the World Championship in Abu Dhabi on 6 December – or before – he will become the youngest to do so by more than three years.

Turning all the way back to 2010 and Sebastian Vettel's maiden title, aged 23 and 134 days, Antonelli would be just 20 years and 102 days. After a few run outs in free practise sessions and testing in 2024, the young gun – son of racing driver and motorsport executive Marco, who owns Italian GT and F4 team AKM Motorsport – Andrea "Kimi" Antonelli replaced Lewis Hamilton at Mercedes to partner George Russell on a one-year contract in 2025. Antonelli picked up two third-placed finishes last year, but mostly played a support role to Russell, who equalled a career-best fourth-placed Championship finish, behind Lando Norris, Max Verstappen and Oscar Piastri.

Emerging from three seasons of struggling with ground effect – a design reacting to new regulations in 2022 – Mercedes were tipped to compete again amidst arguably the biggest overhaul of regulations in the history of the sport in 2026.

But it was 28 year-old Russell – not Antonelli – who was widely regarded as the favourite following strong pre-season testing and the formidable new Mercedes power unit. The Melbourne GP in March went to form, with Russell winning pole position and taking the flag, but a few eyebrows were raised as 19 year-old Antonelli finished less than three seconds behind the Brit after a crash in final practise and a poor star from second on the grid.

It didn't take long for Antonelli to take his first victory, which came a week later in Shanghai, ahead of Russell and Lewis Hamilton, who landed his maiden podium with Ferrari. ➤

Below: Four-time World Champion Max Verstappen is in the title-chasing pack

Above: **Lando Norris celebrates, but will it be Kimi Antonelli winning the 2026 title?** (Above) **Norris' McLaren teammate, Australian Oscar Piastri** (Left)

Antonelli became the youngest ever driver to take pole position and the second-youngest driver to win an F1 race in China, less than a year older than Verstappen who won the 2016 Spanish Grand Prix at 18 years and 166 days old. Antonelli went on to win the following four races in Japan, Miami, Canada and Monaco, storming to a lead – again, the youngest to do so – 66 points ahead of Hamilton, with compatriot Russell hot on their heels. Then, in Barcelona, Antonelli's season hit a snag, or rather a front wing, when the Italian attacked Russell for second place with five laps to go in a wheel-to-wheel fight. The move ended Antonelli's race, with Russell finishing second behind Hamilton who topped the podium for the first time in Ferrari colours, aged 41; a first win for him since the 2024 Belgian Grand Prix, and a sniff of what could be a record eighth World Championship.

Antonelli fought back in Austria, finishing third behind Russell and Verstappen, before another setback at Silverstone with a mechanical and a 15th-placed finish from pole position, despite recording the fastest lap (a five-second time penalty for exceeding track limits saw him drop from ninth). Another five podiums followed for Antonelli, including two victories and his most impressive drive to date on home soil at Monza, recovering from 19th on the grid to take the win from Russell and Verstappen. This was Russell's chance, starting from the front row, but he blew it before victory in Azerbaijan gave the Brit a glimmer of hope after a challenging three months.

Then the big question; could the 20-year-old show a mature enough head to hold on to a 66-point lead with eight races to go? Finishing with Las Vegas, Qatar and Abu Dhabi, there's a very experienced hunting pack behind the young Italian, including two multiple World Champions in Verstappen and Hamilton, a defending World Champion in Lando Norris, and wounded chasers Russell, Piastri and Charles Leclerc, all hungry for the taste of a first title.

Dutchman Verstappen won six of the final nine races last season, popping the Champagne in Vegas, Qatar and Abu Dhabi to deny Piastri a maiden title, handing it to Norris who won in Mexico City and Sao Paulo, and scraped a third-placed finish to Abu Dhabi to win by two points.

Verstappen, Russell and Norris all won races on the final four tracks in 2022, 2023 and 2024, with Verstappen and Hamilton sharing spoils in the six preceeding run-ins.

So the young pretender (who grew up idolising Ayrton Senna) has contenders to fight off who know their way around the pointy end of the F1 season and the tracks scheduled. Lewis Hamilton, at 41, boasts over 21 years of F1 experience. Antonelli has, however, built such a seemingly unassiable lead that it would be one of the greatest capitulations of all time, should he fail to replace Vettel as the youngest Champion in history. Such is the nature of sport. ■

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