

A bright space is always the right space

To advertise here, call: 444 11 300

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar 2022

155 days to go

To advertise here, call: 444 11 300

Sunday, June 19, 2022
Dhul-Qa'da 20, 1443 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Ukraine's Svitolina hoped US Open would take firmer action on Russians

Page 3

SPOTLIGHT

Dominant Bagnaia takes pole position for German MotoGP

World champion and current overall leader Quartararo will start second

AFP
Sachsenring, Germany

Francesco Bagnaia continued his domination of the Sachsenring track yesterday by taking pole position at the German MotoGP. Italy's Bagnaia will start today's race at the top of the grid with reigning world champion and current overall leader Fabio Quartararo of France in second.

This is the third pole position of the season for Ducati rider Bagnaia, who is fifth overall in the championship standings and 66 points behind Quartararo. Bagnaia kept his cool as temperatures exceeded 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit) in the shade, soaring to 50 degrees on the track.

"We did a great job today in these conditions, it's very hot and tomorrow it will be even hotter," said Bagnaia. Frenchman Johann Zarco secured the third spot at the front of the grid for the 10th MotoGP race of the season. Less than a tenth of a second separated the three fastest riders. "I'm very happy to be on the front row, our pace is pretty good, the only question is which tyre to use, but we are in a good position," said Quartararo.

Spain's Aleix Espargaro, currently second overall, Italian Fabio Di Giannantonio and Australia's Jack Miller make up the grid's second row. Bagnaia has been in irresistible form all weekend and clocked a fastest time of one minute, 19.931 seconds in qualifying yesterday.

The Italian set a new track record on Friday, then took turns with Spain's Aleix Espargaro lowering it further yesterday morning. "I was surprised to start a weekend like this, but the good feeling grew from session to session and now I feel very comfortable," Bagnaia said.

Before his arrival in Saxony, the Sachsenring track record had been held by Marc Marquez of Honda, who has won the German MotoGP every year it has held since 2013. With the Spaniard sidelined after surgery on his arm, the absence of the six-time MotoGP world champion opens the door for Bagnaia. "It's good for



Ducati's Italian rider Francesco Bagnaia celebrates after taking the pole position for the German MotoGP at the Sachsenring racing circuit in Hohenstein-Ernstthal near Chemnitz, eastern Germany, yesterday. (AFP)

us that Marc isn't here this weekend - it's one more podium place to take and maybe make history by taking a win to follow on from him," joked Bagnaia.

Despite taking part in Friday and yesterday's practice sessions, Suzuki rider Alex Rins will sit out the German MotoGP today due to a fractured wrist he suffered earlier this month at the Catalan MotoGP. Doctors had given Rins the green light to race at Sachsenring, but he opted not to ride in yesterday's final session, his team said in a statement.

STARTING MOTOGP GRID

- 1st row:** 1. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati), 2. Fabio Quartararo (FRA/Yamaha), 3. Johann Zarco (FRA/Ducati-Pramac)
2nd row: 4. Aleix Espargaro (ESP/Aprilia), 5. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/Ducati-Gresini), 6. Jack Miller (AUS/Ducati)
3rd row: 7. Luca Martin (ITA/Ducati-VR46), 8. Jorge Martin (ESP/Ducati-Pramac), 9. Maverick Vinales (ESP/Aprilia)
4th row: 10. Takaaki Nakagami (JPN/Honda-LCR), 11. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Ducati-VR46), 12. Joan Mir (ESP/Suzuki)

- 5th row:** 13. Pol Espargaro (ESP/Honda), 14. Miguel Oliveira (POR/KTM), 15. Brad Binder (RSA/KTM)
6th row: 16. Alex Marquez (ESP/Honda-LCR), 17. Enea Bastianini (ITA/Ducati-Gresini), 18. Stefan Bradl (GER/Honda)
7th row: 19. Andrea Dovizioso (ITA/Yamaha-RNF), 20. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/Yamaha), 21. Remy Gardner (AUS/KTM-Tech3)
8th row: 22. Raul Fernandez (ESP/KTM-Tech3), 23. Darryn Binder (RSA/Yamaha-RNF)

WORLD SWIMMING CHAMPIONSHIPS

Redemption for Ledesky and Winnington with 400m freestyle gold

AFP
Budapest

American Katie Ledesky and Australian Elijah Winnington gained early redemption for Olympic 400m freestyle disappointments on the first evening of the World Swimming Championships in Budapest yesterday. Ledesky, 25, had been eclipsed in the women's 400m freestyle by Australian Ariarne Titmus, who took the world title in 2019, the Olympic title last year and the world record last month. That left Ledesky second best in an event she had dominated but with Titmus focussing on the Commonwealth Games, Ledesky broke her own world championship record as she held off a determined challenge from Canadian 15-year-old Summer McIntosh.

Ledesky won in 3min 58.15sec, three-quarters of a second outside the world record but 0.19sec inside her old championship mark. McIntosh became the third woman to dip under four minutes in a textile suit. American Leah Smith took bronze in 4:02.08.

In the men's race that opened the evening, Winnington won in 3:41.22, the fastest time in the event in a decade, to edge German Lukas Martens by 1.63sec with Brazilian Guilherme Pereira da Costa third. Winnington, 22, had gone to the Olympics as the favourite in the men's 400m free, but slumped to seventh in a final won by surprising Tunisian Ahmed Hafnaoui of Tunisia, who did not enter yesterday's event.

In the women's race, Ledesky collected her 16th world championship gold. "It feels good," she said. "It's the fastest I've ever been at worlds. I'm really happy with that, and excited about the rest of the week."

She said losing the world record "wasn't an added motivation." "If I didn't have motivation before, that it would be a problem." She said competition was ramping up with the Paris Olympics two years away. "Summer is now in the sub-4 minute club, I will have my work cut out for me, these races are only going to get harder."



Katie Ledesky of the US is all smiles after winning the women's 400m freestyle gold at the World Swimming Championships in Budapest yesterday.

Martens came through to take the lead after 250m and was ahead after 300m, and 0.8sec inside the world-record split. In the morning heats, Winnington faded and was caught by Auboeck at the end. This time the Australian had something in reserve and surged past the wilting Martens in the final 50m.

Pereira da Costa surged from fifth to third on the last lap while Auboeck was unable to repeat his blazing finish.

The time was the fifth fastest ever and the best since streamlined body suits were banned. The victory ended a decade-long Asian domination of the event. South Korean Park Tae-Hwan won in 2011 and China's Sun Yang took the next four.

France's Leon Marchand swum the second-fastest men's 400m medley time in history to win gold in Budapest. The 20-year-old won in 4min 4.28sec, just over a third of a second outside the record set by Michael Phelps in Beijing in 2008. American Foster Carson, 20, was second at 2.28sec with US Olympic champion Chase Kalisz was third.

Both the Olympic champions in the 400m freestyle relays continued their domination of the event as the US men and Australian women won with a second to spare. The US only started Caeleb Dressel and Brooks Curry from the quartet who won in Tokyo but left Australia trailing in second with Italy third.

ASIAN ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Doha is a lucky venue for me, says Philippines' Yulo after winning third gold



Philippines' Carlos Yulo won gold medals in vault, parallel bars and floor during the Asian Artistic Gymnastics Championships at Aspire Dome.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Carlos Yulo of the Philippines concluded his 9th Senior Asian Artistic Gymnastics Championships campaign on a brilliant note by winning three gold and one silver medal. The 22-year-old Filipino yesterday picked up two gold medals in vault and parallel bars to add to his floor gold which he won on Friday besides All-Around silver, which was his country's first silver in Asian Championships on Thursday.

"Doha is my favourite venue. I like this city and the venue where I had won my maiden World Championships medal in 2018," said Yulo, who is based in Japan for training.

Overall, it has been a great show by Yulo, whose achievement here helped him seal his fifth spot in FIG Artistic World Championships in Liverpool scheduled to be held from October 29 to November 6, with the Filipino finishing fourth on the rings. All the podium-finishers together with fourth and fifth-placers will qualify for the world meet as well. Yulo pipped his nearest competitors Hansol Kim of South Korea and Japan's Shiga Tachibana for the gold with a combined Execution and Difficulty of 14.884 points in the men's



China's Wei Xiaoyuan (centre) and Tang Xijing (right) clinched gold and silver respectively in the women's uneven bars, while South Korea's Lee Yunseo took bronze at the Aspire Dome.

vault at the Aspire Dome. The two-time world champion became an overnight hero in the Qatari capital four years ago after he bagged his country's first-ever medal, a bronze in men's Floor final, in a World Championships. "It's a lucky venue for me. I always

love to visit Qatar and I also thank the Gymnastics Association of Philippines for supporting me," said Yulo, who claimed his second gold of the day in Parallel Bars. Yulo collected 15.167 points followed by China's Dehang Yin and Japan's Tsuyoshi Hsaegawa.

love to visit Qatar and I also thank the Gymnastics Association of Philippines for supporting me," said Yulo, who claimed his second gold of the day in Parallel Bars. Yulo collected 15.167 points followed by China's Dehang Yin and Japan's Tsuyoshi Hsaegawa.

HORSE RACING

O'Brien sweeps to another notable racing landmark

'In this life and world we take one day at a time and try to appreciate every day'

AFP
Ascot, United Kingdom

Record-breaking Irish trainer Aidan O'Brien brought up another milestone yesterday as he celebrated his 900th Group or Graded winner with Broome's victory in the Hardwicke Stakes on the last day of Royal Ascot.

O'Brien's great rival these days Charlie Appleby - who started out training a while after the 52-year-old Irishman did - is racking up group races at a rate of knots and added another couple on Saturday.

There was to be no winner for Queen Elizabeth II, who missed the meeting she is so closely associated with for the first time since her coronation in 1953 - the meeting was held behind closed doors due to Covid-19 in 2020. However, as a reminder of her influence over the meeting 70 school children donned her colours to form a guard of honour for the Royal party as they rolled into the parade ring in their carriages pre-racing.

Ryan Moore rode a brilliant and bold tactical race on Broome leading for the majority of the contest. O'Brien never one to blow his own trumpet brushed aside taking credit for his latest landmark. "In this life and world we take one day at a time and try to appreciate every day," said O'Brien. "We're so grateful to do what we do every day. It's incredible really."

Moore's broad grin after he completed a double when Ro-haan won the Wokingham Stakes for a second successive year - only the fifth horse to do so - replaced the frown when he and O'Brien drew a blank in the opening race.



Broome, ridden by Ryan Moore, wins the Hardwicke Stakes at the Royal Ascot yesterday. (Reuters)

'BUILT LIKE A TANK'

Their runner Alfred Munnings entered the Chesham Stakes as 16/1 favourite for next year's Derby but ran like a drain as after coming with a challenge he ran up the white flag almost as quickly.

Instead it was the debutant 40/1 shot Holloway Boy who came with a storming late run to overhaul another outsider 80/1 chance Pearling Path and give jockey Danny Tudhope his fourth and most surprising win of the week.

"It is a bit of a surprise to be honest," said Tudhope.

"Karl (Burke the trainer) said

just go out and enjoy yourselves."

Burke admitted he had only run the horse so the owner Nick White could get tickets for Ascot.

"Nick rang me and said he had been let down for a box on Saturday so I said 'We will enter the horse and use the tickets for that!'" said Burke.

"We worked well at home so we thought we'd let him take his chances and give the owners a nice day out... I think we have achieved that!"

"He is the first horse and first runner that he (Nick White) has ever had in his colours."

Appleby's double came with

Noble Truth in The Jersey Stakes - the trainer crediting his victory down to having gelded (castrated) him recently to focus his mind - and then a 1-2 in the Group One Platinum Jubilee Stakes. James Doyle conjured up a terrific run from Appleby's second choice Naval Crown to edge William Buick on his stablemate Creative Force - a reversal of the places in last year's Jersey Stakes.

"I would be lying if I said I expected him to win today," said Doyle. "He's built like a tank isn't he!"

Doyle said Appleby had thought he was going to explode

if he did not get a winner on the last day. "Charlie said I looked a bit angry and I said I was running out of bullets," said a grinning Doyle.

In a truly international contest American runner Campanelle dead-heated with Australian Artorius.

The latter's time in England is far from over as he is likely to run in the July Cup in Newmarket.

"He could not have run any better, he has made us very proud, we would love for Australia for him to have won, but there is no question it was the run of the race" said one of the owners Henry Field.

Former Germany striker Klose appointed head coach of SCR Altach

Germany's all-time top goalscorer Miroslav Klose has been appointed head coach of Austrian Bundesliga side SCR Altach, the club said. Klose, who scored 71 goals for Germany in 137 matches, was assistant coach of the German national team between 2016 and 2018. He became coach of Bayern Munich's Under-17s in 2018, and spent a season as first-team assistant coach under Hansi Flick. "It was just that positive feeling right from the start that

I have to have, that I'm in the right place here," Klose said in a statement. "The first discussions with those responsible were so open that it was clear to me that I want to do this." Altach finished bottom of the Austrian Bundesliga at the end of the regular season, but were able to avoid the drop in the relegation stage.

Bronze joins Barca on 2-year deal
England women defender Lucy Bronze

has joined Barcelona on a free transfer after leaving Manchester City, the Spanish club said. Bronze, the FIFA Best Women's Player of the Year for 2020, has signed a two-year contract. She has Champions League winning pedigree having won the competition three times in a row with Olympique Lyonnais. During her second stint with City, she won the women's FA Cup and women's League Cup. The Women's Super League club had said

Bronze would leave with her contract set to expire this month. Barcelona's women team won the domestic treble last season, winning 45 of their 47 matches all season, but lost in the Champions League final to Lyon. Bronze bolsters a defence that kept 26 clean sheets last season and conceded only 23 goals. The 30-year-old is Barca's third defensive recruit of the summer after Nuria Rabano signed from Sociedad while Laia Codina was given a new contract.

CYCLING

France's Pinot climbs to 7th stage victory

AFP
Vaduz

France's Thibaut Pinot climbed to victory in the hilly seventh stage of the Tour of Switzerland yesterday with Colombian Sergio Higuita taking the race lead going into the final day's racing.

Pinot, riding for Groupama-FDJ, crossed the line alone at the summit of Malbrun in Liechtenstein after the 195km mountainous ride from Ambri in Switzerland.

It was the second stage win this season for Pinot, who crossed the line ahead of Spaniard Oscar Rodriguez and Kazakh Alexey Lutsenko, after his success in the fifth stage of the Tour of the Alps in April. Bora rider Higuita crossed in fourth to pull on the leader's yellow jersey heading into today's final stage time-trial, at the expense of Dane Jakob Fuglsang who arrived in seventh position. Pinot was among a group

of fourteen breakaway riders which formed at the start of the stage which built up an eight-minute lead on the peloton. Still in the lead before the ascent of the Malbrun, a 12.4km climb with an average 8.4 percent gradient, the group dwindled with two riders, Astana's Lutsenko and Cofidis' Ion Izaguirre, pursued by Pinot.

The 32-year-old Frenchman finally joined the pair and accelerated to seal victory.

The coronavirus-hit race which has seen a whole swathe of riders drop out ends with a 25.6km time-trial in Vaduz, the capital of Liechtenstein.

RESULTS

Overall leader
Sergio Higuita COL (BORA-hansgrohe) Stage winners 1 Thibaut Pinot FRA (Groupama-FDJ) 2 Oscar Rodriguez ESP (Movistar Team) 3 Alexey Lutsenko KAZ (Astana - Qazaqstan Team) Last stage will be: Jun 19-Stage 8 Vaduz to Vaduz, 25.6 km, Individual time trial.

BADMINTON

Axelsen powers into final with win over Malaysia's Lee



Denmark's Viktor Axelsen hits a return against Malaysia's Lee Zii Jia during their semi-final match at the Indonesia Open in Jakarta yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Jakarta

Badminton world number one Viktor Axelsen on Saturday secured a place in the Indonesia Open final after toppling Malaysian rising star Lee Zii Jia in a tight, fast-paced encounter in Jakarta.

Both players started the match strongly in front of a near-full Istora Senayan arena but Lee edged out his opponent in the first game with an aggressive volley of quick-fire shots.

Axelsen bounced back to claim the second before the decider went down to the wire as Lee kept up the pressure on the Tokyo gold medalist until the very last point.

The top-ranked Dane even-

tually claimed victory 19-21, 21-11, 23-21, later describing the match as "tough".

"To be honest, it was really hard to control (the game) today. However, I am really proud that I came back (in the second and third sets)," Axelsen told journalists after his win.

In the women's singles, world number two Tai Tzu-ying booked a spot in the final after a thrilling match-up against China's fourth-seeded Chen Yufei.

The Taiwanese star stumbled early on to lose the first game by a wide margin but managed to gather herself and take the match 10-21 26-24 21-12.

In the final Tai will meet Chinese unseeded player Wang Zhiyi who knocked out compatriot He Bingjiao 21-15 21-10 in their semi.

FOCUS

Two years after car crash, Momota in free fall

AFP
Tokyo

Japan's Kento Momota was once badminton's undisputed king but his career has gone into free fall ever since a car crash more than two years ago which left him badly hurt.

There are now severe doubts that the 27-year-old former two-times world champion - who was embroiled in a gambling scandal earlier in his career - will ever reach the top again.

Momota's world was turned upside down in January 2020 when the vehicle taking him to Kuala Lumpur airport crashed hours after he won the Malaysia Masters, killing the driver and leaving the player with a fractured eye socket.

He was out of action for a year and is now a shadow of his former self - the left-handed ace flopped at the Tokyo Olympics and has lost in the first round of four of the five singles tournaments he has entered this year.

"His defence is still a bit dubious, his net game isn't as strong as it used to be and then of course

his self-confidence must have taken a big, big hit," former Danish national team coach Steen Schleicher Pedersen told AFP.

"Maybe even his life values, after being in a crash like that where the driver died. Maybe he doesn't have that hunger any more, maybe he doesn't care, maybe it's changed him," added Pedersen, now a badminton commentator. Pedersen said it looked like Momota's vision was affecting his play last year, especially his defence.

Momota won a record-breaking 11 titles in 2019, losing just six of the 73 matches he played and looking every inch a legend in the making. Then came the crash which left him with double vision and required surgery on a bone near his eye.

Home hope Momota flamed out in the first round of last year's pandemic-delayed Tokyo Olympics, but he looked back to something like his best when he won the Indonesia Masters in November without dropping a game.

A back problem then forced him out of the following month's World Tour Finals and world championships and he has

struggled to generate any momentum since the new year.

The enigmatic Momota has publicly said little about his fitness and Pedersen says the lack of information means those on the outside must rely on "guesswork".

"Has he been able to practise fully this year? If he's been limited in his practice, that could be a part of the explanation," he said.

"If he's practised 100 percent from January 1 to now and he's been hitting the gym and doing all the badminton practice that he needs and this is the outcome, then there's no more, most likely."

Momota is still ranked number two in the world but the points system has been skewed by the coronavirus pandemic and he is expected to plummet once a truer picture emerges later this year.

He did not sound confident when he spoke to Japanese reporters in April, saying he just wanted "to do all I can at this moment".

"It makes me sad when I see comments like 'he's not playing well' or 'the Momota of old doesn't exist anymore', but I'm

trying not to pay too much attention to that," he said.

Momota suffered another first-round defeat on Wednesday, this time to Danish world number 13 Rasmus Gemke at the Indonesia Open.

He looked well off the pace again and said afterwards that he "didn't have the stamina", blaming himself for making "so many mistakes".

Momota has bounced back before and will need to do so again if he is to be a force at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Momota was banned from Japan's 2016 Rio Olympics team for gambling at an illegal casino.

The ban forced him to play in smaller tournaments around the world as he tried to climb back up the rankings, and sent him on a winning run that took him all the way to the top.

Pedersen says playing regularly "gives you confidence, it gives you touch, it gives you accuracy", and he believes Momota "definitely needs to start winning".

"He needs to do good practice and then he needs to start winning matches - a lot of matches," he said.



Japan's Kento Momota returns a shot against England's Toby Pentty during their group stage match at the 2022 Thomas and Uber Cup in Bangkok on May 10, 2022. (AFP)

FOCUS

Svitolina hoped US Open would take firmer action on Russians



Reuters
Mumbai

Ukraine's Elina Svitolina does not agree with the US Open decision to allow players from Russia and Belarus to compete as neutrals and hoped the Grand Slam organisers would take a firmer stand following Moscow's invasion of her country.

Russian and Belarusian players are banned from competing at Wimbledon, which starts on June 27, but the United States Tennis Association allowed them to play under a neutral flag at the hardcourt major in New York.

"It's their decision to make, they decided to take this path. I don't support it because I feel like they should have taken more serious action," the former world number three told Reuters from Geneva.

"Our (Ukraine's) sports is thrown back by 10 years minimum because all the infrastructure has been damaged or completely destroyed. I can tell you

many, many factors that can play a role in the decision of not letting Russian and Belarusian players compete."

Russian and Belarusian players, who also participated at the French Open, are banned from team events but are allowed to compete as neutrals on the men's and women's tours.

The 27-year-old Svitolina pledged to donate her prize money from tournaments to the Ukrainian army before pulling out of the tour after losing in the second round of the Miami Masters in March.

Last week she joined former Ukraine, Chelsea and AC Milan footballer Andriy Shevchenko as an ambassador for 'UNITED24' - a charity platform launched by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to collect donations.

Born in the Ukrainian port city of Odesa, Svitolina expected more support from the governing bodies of tennis and was completely against the policy of allowing players from Russia and Belarus to compete as neutrals.

The silence from her fellow

players from Russia and Belarus was also surprising.

"For us it was not really understandable why we didn't get support from them. I feel like it created tension between us," Svitolina said during the video interview. Svitolina thanked world number one Iga Swiatek for her French Open victory speech when the Pole urged Ukraine to "stay strong" and reminded everyone that the war was still ongoing.

MUCH STRESS

On February 24, Russia launched the invasion, which Moscow calls a "special military operation".

A few days earlier, Svitolina, who is married to French tennis player Gael Monfils, found out the couple were expecting a baby in October. "I was extremely excited about the news. And then a few days later the war started," she said. "It was a lot of stress, we were really worried."

"I was actually more worried about the war than about myself. I don't even remember what

happened during the first few days. It was unbearable."

The war has changed her as a person.

"The priorities changed, the vision of life changed," Svitolina said. "It's not that I didn't cherish the family time with my parents before but now I really enjoy spending time with them."

"They got a chance to leave Ukraine and they are in Europe right now. A lot of things changed inside, mentally. A war really changes people."

The pregnancy will force her to take a break from travelling to fundraising events but Svitolina plans to be back to her work by the end of the year and she also wants to return to the tennis court.

"Right now I feel like the last time I held the racket was like 20 years ago," said Svitolina, who won the Olympic singles bronze medal in Tokyo last year.

"I really want to compete at the (2024) Olympics in Paris. This is my goal. But it's not the first thing that I'm thinking right now."

GOLF

Morikawa shares lead, Rahm and McIlroy one adrift

'NO ONE HAS TAKEN IT DEEP SO FAR AND RUN AWAY'

AFP
Brookline, United States

A weekend showdown of golf's top stars was set Friday at the US Open as two-time major winner Collin Morikawa seized a share of the lead while Jon Rahm and Rory McIlroy were one stroke adrift.

Seventh-ranked Morikawa fired a four-under par 66 and American Joel Dahmen, who shot 68, joined him on five-under 135 after 36 holes at The Country Club. Second-ranked defending champion Rahm, third-ranked McIlroy and Americans Hayden Buckley, Aaron Wise and Beau Hossler shared third on 136.

"No one has taken it deep so far and run away," Morikawa said.

"But you know what, right now my game feels really good. The last few days is a huge confidence booster for me heading into this weekend, and hopefully we can make some separation somehow."

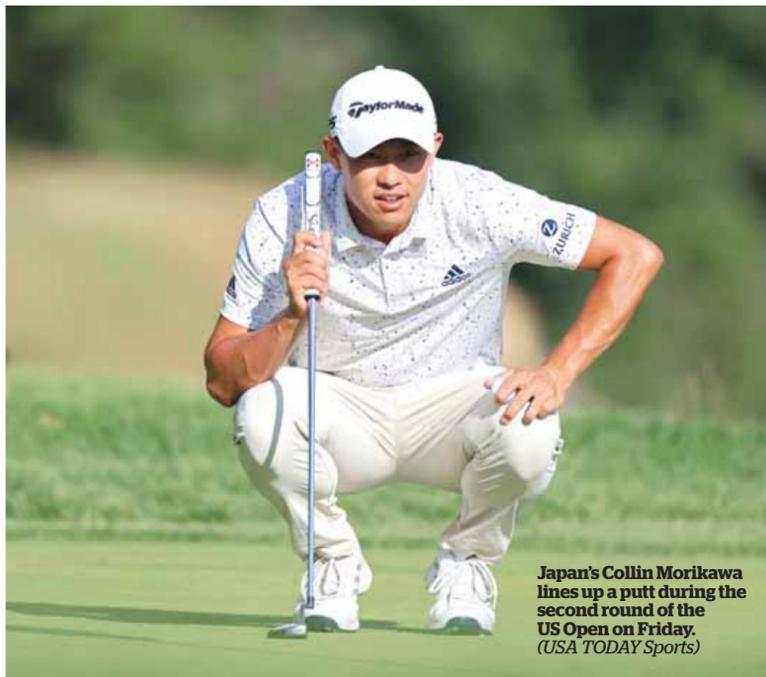
Morikawa won last year's British Open and the 2020 PGA Championship and the 25-year-old American could find himself 75% of the way to a career Grand Slam by Sunday night.

"I can't really talk about what it would be like to win this one. I've got to focus on tomorrow," Morikawa said.

"I've got to make sure I don't run out of steam... I've just got to figure out a way to focus a little bit deeper and really get dialled in for the next 36."

Starting on the 10th tee, Morikawa made birdie putts of 10 feet at the 12th hole, 13 feet at the par-5 14th, 14 feet at the 17th and 33 feet at the first.

After his lone bogey at the fourth, Morikawa dropped his second shot at the par-4 eighth



Japan's Collin Morikawa lines up a putt during the second round of the US Open on Friday. (USA TODAY Sports)

four feet from the cup but missed his eagle putt and settled for birdie. "I knew the tempo was a little off," Morikawa said.

"It just happened to be a bad stroke. So I'm not too worried about it really."

McIlroy, who endured a double-bogey disaster at the third hole, sank a 15-foot birdie putt at the 12th, drove the green in two to set up a tap-in birdie at the par-5 14th and sank a 12-foot birdie putt at 17.

"I'm in a good place," McIlroy said. "I'm really happy with where my game is at and I think that's the most important thing."

McIlroy, chasing his first major title since 2014, comes off a victory in last week's PGA Canadian Open.

Not since 1934 has a player won the week before and then captured the US Open.

"I have to go out with the mindset this week that I'm going to try to win my first again," McIlroy said.

"I'm playing as good a golf as I've played in a long time."

Top-ranked Masters champion Scottie Scheffler, with an eagle and two birdies in the last six holes, was on 137.

"I just stayed real patient,"

said Scheffler. "If a few putts had gone in instead of around, it could have been a really special day."

Rahm, a back-nine starter, holed a 12-foot eagle putt at the par-5 14th, drove the green to set up a birdie at the par-4 fifth and chipped from the rough ahead of a tap-in birdie at eight.

"It's great for the game of golf that the highest-ranked players and the best players are up there," Rahm said.

"It's fun for all of us because we all want to compete against the best and beat the best."

Dahmen, 34, won his only PGA

title last year in the Dominican Republic. He missed a 10-foot birdie putt at 18 that would have given him the lead alone.

"It's all kind of a blur, which is probably a good thing," Dahmen said. "Handled nerves pretty well out there. It's going to be quite a weekend."

Six-time major winner Phil Mickelson missed the cut on 11-over 151. The 52-year-old US lefthander was among 15 rebels from the Saudi-backed LIV Golf Series facing US PGA Tour stars.

US major champions Dustin Johnson and Patrick Reed were the best of the LIV players in the field on 141, with Bryson DeChambeau and Richard Bland also making the cut on 142. But LIV players were a combined 53-over on Thursday and 36-over on Friday. With the richest purses in golf history, LIV Golf has lured talent from the PGA Tour, which banned 17 current and former members last week after they played LIV's debut event in England.

LEADING SECOND-ROUND SCORES

- 135-Joel Dahmen (USA) 67-68, Collin Morikawa (USA) 69-66, 136-Beau Hossler (USA) 69-67, Aaron Wise (USA) 68-68, Hayden Buckley (USA) 68-68, Jon Rahm (ESP) 69-67, Rory McIlroy (NIR) 67-69, 137-Patrick Rodgers (USA) 69-68, Matthew NeSmith (USA) 68-69, Scottie Scheffler (USA) 70-67, Nick Hardy (USA) 69-68, Brian Harman (USA) 68-69, 138-Adam Hadwin (CAN) 66-72, Aam Burns (USA) 71-67, Matthew Fitzpatrick (ENG) 68-70, 139-Callum Tarren (ENG) 67-72, Keegan Bradley (USA) 70-69, Will Zalatoris (USA) 69-70, Davis Riley (USA) 72-67, Xander Schauffele (USA) 70-69, Travis Vick (USA) 70-69, MJ Daffue (RSA) 67-72, David Lingmerth (SWE) 67-72

LPGA CLASSIC

Kupcho leads defending champ Korda by two-stroke

AFP
Washington

Jennifer Kupcho warmed up late on the way to a five-under-par 67 that gave her a two-shot lead over defending champion Nelly Korda in Friday's second round of the Meijer LPGA Classic in Michigan.

Kupcho, who torched the Blythefield Country Club course near Grand Rapids on Thursday for a nine-under-par 63, said she didn't expect things to be so easy on Friday.

So she stayed patient through eight opening pars, a run that ended with a birdie at the 18th before she picked up four more birdies in her last nine holes for a 14-under par total of 130.

"I started out not hitting it great, was really just trying to stay patient," Kupcho said. "Couple of holes (I) saved par, so I actually got out of the holes pretty well."

She said an up and down for par at 17 "really boosted my confidence for the rest of the round."

She followed with birdies at the first, second, fifth and eighth to stay atop the leaderboard as Korda, playing her second tournament since returning from a four-month break because of a blood clot in her left arm, gained ground with a seven-under-par 65.

Korda, ranked second in the world behind South Korean Ko Jin-young, also teed off on 10, opening with a birdie.

Her shot of the day came at the 14th, where she was in the rough off the tee and laid up, then saw her shot from about 82 yards out hit the green and spin back into the cup for an eagle.

"It was fun," Korda said, her only sight regret the fact that it came on a part of the course with few spectators.

Korda added birdies at the 17th and 18th and the third and fifth holes in a bogey-free ef-

LEADING SCORES

(USA unless noted, par-72)

- 130-Jennifer Kupcho 63-67
- 132-Nelly Korda 67-65
- 133-Carlota Ciganda (ESP) 68-65
- 134-Brooke Henderson (CAN) 68-66, Lexi Thompson 65-69, Madelene Sagstrom (SWE) 65-69
- 135-Anna Nordqvist (SWE) 65-70, Caroline Masson (GER) 67-68
- 136-Jessica Korda 68-68, Gerina Mendoza 64-72, Paula Reto (RSA) 71-65
- 137-Andrea Lee 66-71, Athaya Thitikul (THA) 68-69, Lin Xi Yu (CHN) 70-67, Minjee Lee (AUS) 68-69, Leona Maguire (IRL) 69-68
- 138-Nasa Hataoka (JPN) 71-67, Hannah Green (AUS) 70-68, Liu Ruixin (CHN) 67-71, Lydia Ko (NZL) 70-68, Brittany Lincicome 69-69, Stacy Lewis 67-71, Robynne Ree 71-67.

fort that put her on 12-under 132. "Hopefully I can put together a solid 36 holes over the weekend and we'll see what happens," said the American, who is also the defending champion at next week's Women's PGA Championship at Congressional near Washington.

For the second straight day, gusty winds made for tricky conditions, but Korda and Kupcho both said they liked the challenge.

"The creativity comes out," said Korda, as Kupcho added: "You definitely have to use your brain a lot."

Carlota Ciganda was alone in third on 11-under 133 after a roller-coaster of a seven-under 65. The Spaniard, a five-time winner on the Ladies European Tour who claimed both of her LPGA titles in 2016, had two eagles, six birdies and three bogeys.

It left her a stroke in front of a trio sharing fourth - Canadian Brooke Henderson, American Lexi Thompson and Sweden's Madelene Sagstrom.



Jennifer Kupcho walks on the seventeenth green during round two of the Meijer LPGA Classic at the Blythefield Country Club in Grand Rapids, Michigan. (Getty Images/AFP)

FRASER-PRYCE THINKS SHE CAN RUN EVEN FASTER, EYES 2024 OLYMPICS

Jamaican sprint legend Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce believes she can run faster than she ever "dreamed possible" and has not given up on appearing at the 2024 Olympics.

"What drives me is I believe I can run faster," the 35-year-old told a press conference in the French capital. "I've been hungry in that regard and I've been focusing on the things that I know will help me to do that, my technique and the different phases of the races.

Once I'm able to cement that I definitely think that I will be able to run faster than I ever dreamed possible."

Despite her age, Fraser-Pryce has been improving her times with a 10.60sec last year, the third fastest time in history, and 10.67sec in her only 100m this season in 2022 in Nairobi last month.

"This year my races have been limited. I think about making sure I sustain what I have if I'm going to think about going to

Paris 2024," she said. The eight-time Olympic and ten-time world medallist remains the favourite for the world championships in Eugene, Oregon in July where she is the reigning champion over 100m. "For me after running in Kenya I haven't run a 100 so I want to replicate what I've done before and also focus on what I've been doing in practice," she continued of her hopes for Saturday in the city which hosts the next Olympics. "Before I

wasn't so much thinking about it," she said of her hopes of competing in the Olympics, "but then I ran 10.6 last year and then this year. It all depends on how I feel. If I'm feeling good you'll be seeing me until I'm 40. I don't want to be lining up and everybody's like 'why don't grandma go home'. So it depends on how I feel. I would definitely love to be here in 2024."

After Paris, Fraser-Pryce heads to the Jamaican qualifiers for the

worlds from July 14-24, where she is also hoping to compete in the 200m. "The main goal is the world championship, I'm already automatically in the 100 (as defending champion) and the 200 I'm also contesting that at my national championships."

"It's not a done decision because it takes a toll, it definitely does, so it's having that option and then when the time comes if I'm ready mentally, physically then I'll take that on as well in Eugene."

TENNIS

Kyrgios hits 30 aces but loses to Hurkacz in Halle semi-final

Hurkacz will aim for his first grass court title today when he plays Medvedev

AFP
Halle Westfalen, Germany

Nick Kyrgios sent down 30 aces in losing 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 7-6 (7/4) to Hubert Hurkacz in a dramatic Halle grass court semi-final yesterday. The Australian wild card, who has excelled on the surface over the past fortnight and backed up last weekend's Stuttgart semi-final, was unable to earn victory against the Pole who defeated Roger Federer last year at Wimbledon.

Fifth seed Hurkacz produced 27 aces of his own in a match of more than two hours during which neither man was able to seize any momentum. Wimbledon semi-finalist Hurkacz, ranked 12th to the 65th of Kyrgios, will aim for his first grass court title today when he plays Daniil Medvedev. The world number one dashed the dreams of Germany's Oscar Otte of winning a title on home soil with a 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 victory.

Kyrgios was in good spirits after going down to Hurkacz, whose massive serve rivals his own. "He's a hell of a player," the Australian said. "His serve is incredible. I honestly didn't feel like I was getting any sort of read on it. I was playing well in the last two sets, but I played a shocking tie-break in the second set. It is what it is, I'm happy with my form this week."

Kyrgios will play again next week in Mallorca in a final grass-court tune-up before Wimbledon which starts on June 26. "I might use it as a down week, so I'm not gonna worry too much about the result - but now that I say that, when I get there I will obviously want to continue my form," he added.

Kyrgios is also pumped for Wimbledon, even if the fortnight will not offer ranking points due to the political stand-off between the ATP and the All England Club after the ban on Russian and Belarusian competitors. "I want to try and pick up as many points as I can (before Wimbledon)," Kyrgios said. "I still want to do well at Wimbledon, but with no



Poland's Hubert Hurkacz returns the ball to Australia's Nick Kyrgios in the semi-finals of the ATP 500 Halle Open in Halle, western Germany, yesterday. Hurkacz won 4-6, 7-6, 7-6. (AFP)

ranking points you don't feel the pressure as much."

Medvedev needed 65 minutes to win the opening set, helped as his opponent double-faulted on a set point. He sealed victory on his first match point after 96

minutes, delivering his eighth ace. "It was hot (32 Celsius/89.6 Fahrenheit), tough conditions," said Medvedev. "Reaching the final is not everything, I want to show my best tennis and win the title."

He added: "I'm happy that I managed

to raise my level this year on grass. I love playing on grass." Medvedev is seeking his first trophy since ending Novak Djokovic's chances for a calendar Grand Slam last September with victory in the US Open final.

SPOTLIGHT

Osaka pulls out of Wimbledon due to Achilles injury

AFP
Paris

Former world number one Naomi Osaka pulled out of Wimbledon for the second successive year yesterday, blaming an Achilles injury. "My Achilles still isn't right so I'll see you next time," the four-time Grand Slam title winner posted on Twitter.

Osaka, 24, was already considering not playing over the ATP and WTA tours decision to strip Wimbledon of ranking points after the All England Club banned Russian and Belarusian players in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Osaka's tweet, although not mentioning Wimbledon specifically, was accompanied by a photo of herself on a grass court, and an emoji of a blade of grass.

"Wishing you a speedy return to full fitness, @naomiosaka," tweeted the Wimbledon tournament in response. The Japanese player first suffered the Achilles problem in her opening match in Madrid in May, the injury forcing her to pull out of the following Italian Open.

This month she posted a video of a training exercise on social media accompanied by the caption: "Here's me running on an underwater treadmill because my Achilles is being stubborn still I must be ageing or something."

Osaka's name had appeared on the singles entry list for Wimbledon when it was released last week, but she has not featured in any of the grass-court warm-up events. Osaka, who has never got beyond the third round at the All England Club, raised the possibility of missing the grass court Grand Slam after her first round loss at last month's French Open.

"I'm leaning more towards not playing given the current circumstances. I'm the type of player that gets motivated by seeing my ranking go up," she said. "I feel like if I play Wimble-



don without points, it's more like an exhibition," she continued. "The intention of this measure was good, but the execution is all over the place."

Twelve months ago, Osaka skipped Wimbledon after she had quit the French Open in a row over her refusal to attend mandatory news conferences. Osaka's withdrawal follows that of former Wimbledon finalist Eugenie Bouchard who pulled out of the season's third Grand Slam on Friday.

The Canadian said the lack of world rankings points didn't fit with her plans to manage her return from injury.

Both players' names were absent from an updated players' list. Osaka, now ranked 43 in the world, made it to the third round in Wimbledon twice, in 2017 and 2018, with her last appearance at the tournament in 2019. Wimbledon, which starts on June 27, will see the return of 23-time major winner Serena Williams who hasn't played at all since an injury-hit withdrawal at the All England Club last year.

FOCUS

Top seed Jabeur to meet Bencic in Berlin final

AFP
Berlin

Top seed Ons Jabeur will face Olympic champion Belinda Bencic in the final of Berlin's WTA grass-court tournament after the Tunisian saw off American teenager Coco Gauff in straight sets yesterday.

Gauff, 18, who reached her first Grand Slam final at the French Open earlier this month, fell in the semi-final as Jabeur earned a 7-6 (7/4), 6-2 victory. After grinding out a win when the first set went to a tie breaker, Jabeur kept Gauff under pressure, breaking Gauff three times in the second set before converting her second match point.

"I'm very confident on this surface, so I just tried to play my shots, she (Gauff) plays with a lot of power so coming into the match, I knew I had to play my own game," said Jabeur.

The Tunisian, ranked fourth in the world, became top seed in Berlin after both world number one Iga Swiatek pulled out to rest a shoulder injury ahead of Wimbledon.

"It means a lot to be in the

(Berlin) final," said Jabeur. "I had no great expectations, I came here as fourth or fifth seed and then ended up first, but grass suits me well."

Earlier in the day, Bencic came from behind in her semi-final against Maria Sakkari, a match which lasted over three hours in scorching temperatures. Bencic rallied from losing the hard-fought first set, which lasted 76 minutes, to secure a 6-7 (6/8), 6-4, 6-4 win in temperatures of around 33 degrees Celsius (91 degrees Fahrenheit) in the shade.

RAIN SCUPPERS PLAY IN BIRMINGHAM

Former Wimbledon champion Simona Halep was made to wait as yesterday's semi-final matches in the Birmingham WTA tournament were postponed until today because of rain.

Romanian Halep, the second seed, had been due to play Brazil's Beatriz Haddad Maia, winner of last week's Nottingham Open, for a place in the final in the pre-Wimbledon grass-court tournament.

Romania's Sorana Cirstea had been due to face off against China's eighth seed Zhang Shuai in the second semi-final.

QUEEN'S CLUB CHAMPIONSHIP

Reigning champ Berrettini to face Krajinovic in final

AFP
London

Reigning champion Matteo Berrettini will defend his title today against Serb Filip Krajinovic after both advanced in the rain-interrupted semi-finals at the Queen's Club ATP grass-court tournament.

The 10th-ranked Berrettini, the champion in Stuttgart last week, beat Botić van de Zandschulp of the Netherlands 6-4, 6-3 on Saturday to show his form with just over a week before the start of Wimbledon. Berrettini next meets Krajinovic who is bidding for a maiden career title after easing past former Wimbledon runner-up Marin Cilic, a Queen's winner in 2012 and 2018, 6-3, 6-3.

Berrettini and Krajinovic have met twice before with the Italian winning both on clay including the final in Budapest two years ago. The 26-year-old has returned strong following three months out, and is targeting his seventh tour-level crown and fourth on grass. "It was a really tough match," said Berrettini. "We stopped for the rain. I had a lot of chance



Italy's Matteo Berrettini celebrates after his semi-final win over Netherlands' Botić van de Zandschulp at the Queen's Club Championship in London yesterday. (Reuters)

es. It was windy again and really tough to play but I definitely think it was the best match of the week, so I am really happy and looking forward to the final."

Berrettini left his 29th-ranked opponent

no chance, despite struggling to convert his break points, managing just three of 15 obtained. Delayed by an hour due to the showers after the scorching heat of the last few days, the match had to

be interrupted again at 6-4, 3-2 and break point to follow in favour of Berrettini, to the great displeasure of his rival.

Despite a 28-minute weather delay, the solid serve, heavy forehand strikes and excellent footwork of the Italian made the difference in one hour thirty minutes. Krajinovic saved six break points to dispatch seventh seed Cilic in 80 minutes, having not won a match on grass before this week. "It is an unbelievable feeling," said the 30-year-old who will bid for his first title after four runner-up finishes. "I can't believe I am in the final. Before this tournament I had never won a match on grass. I would come here and win just one or maybe two matches, but now I am in the final. It is a dream come true. It is traditional and an honour to play here in front of you guys. It is a dream for me."

"Let's see. I am just going and enjoy," Krajinovic said when looking ahead to the final. "I have nothing to lose, so let's see. I will enjoy and see what happens and of course give my best." Cilic had 35 wins at The Queen's Club in his career, the most of any active player, but was unable to find a way past Krajinovic in their first meeting.

FOOTBALL

Nketiah signs new Arsenal deal

Reuters
London

Young striker Eddie Nketiah will wear Arsenal's iconic number 14 shirt next season after signing a long-term contract, the Premier League club said yesterday. The 23-year-old joined Arsenal as a teenager and has made 92 first-team appearances, scoring 23 goals. It was only last season, however, that Nketiah began to make a place in Arsenal's attack his own, scoring five goals in his last eight Premier League appearances. The contract is a reward for his form and handing him the 14 shirt, the number worn by club great Thierry Henry, shows the faith manager Mikel Arteta has in him. Theo Walcott and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang also wore 14.

"I'm delighted Eddie is staying with us. He represents what we are all about and all the values of the club," Arteta said. "We are very happy that he has extended his contract and now we have to get to work and continue to develop the great talent and person that we have in him."



Arsenal striker Eddie Nketiah (right) poses with club's technical director Edu after signing a new contract.

Nketiah, who has moved up the pecking order at Arsenal following the departures of experienced strikers Aubameyang and Alexandre Lacazette, will hope he can follow teammates Bukayo Saka and Emile Smith Rowe into the England side. He has yet to earn a senior cap but is England's Under-21s all-time top scorer with 16 goals in 17 appearances.

Ooredoo officials meet FIFA Chief Business Officer



Ooredoo's senior officials met with Romy Gai (left), FIFA's Chief Business Officer, on his recent trip to Doha. Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad bin Nasser al-Thani, Chief Commercial Officer at Ooredoo, and a delegation of senior Ooredoo officials welcomed Gai on his visit. Sheikh Nasser and Mr Gai discussed the strength of bilateral ties between Ooredoo and FIFA, with Ooredoo confirming its staunch support for FIFA events including the upcoming World Cup Qatar 2022, of which Ooredoo is Official Middle East & Africa Telecommunications Operator. Gai expressed FIFA's appreciation of Ooredoo's continued support of sports activities events and tournaments - particularly football, at both local and international levels - and stressed FIFA's pride in co-operating with Ooredoo as a leading ICT provider in Qatar and the Middle East region. Gai thanked Ooredoo for its dedication to supporting and promoting football, and its efforts to upgrade communication solutions to ensure an enhanced fan experience at the World Cup.