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FOOTBALL

Ceferin rules out bid to replace Infantino

UEFA chief warns the under-fire FIFA president must either quit or face a challenger

Reuters
London

FIFA President Gianni Infantino laid out his manifesto for reelection as the champion of poorer football nations as UEFA chief Aleksander Ceferin ruled out running against him but said he thought there would be an opposition candidate.

Almost a month after Infantino tabled his now abandoned proposal to create a commercial body for FIFA tournament rights and sell off 20% to private investors, the battle for the future of global governance of the world's most popular sport rages on.

European governing body UEFA, backed by the regional blocs for Asia (AFC) and North and Central America and the Caribbean (CONCACAF), has led the opposition and Ceferin suggested that Infantino should stand down.

"There are two options," he told *"The Rest Is Politics: Leading"* podcast. "One option is that he realises that he doesn't have the support, and that's not only a political support of the ones who vote, but the political support of football community, the political support of fans, the political support of the players, former players, coaches. And the second option that he goes to the elections in March, but in that case, I think he will have a candidate against him. I don't know yet who."

Sources familiar with the process told Reuters last week that UEFA, the AFC and CONCACAF were considering a third option – a vote of no confidence in Infantino ahead of the ballot in March next year.

Slovenian Ceferin, who said he had had no contact with Infantino since the controversy erupted, thought his lack of interest



FIFA President Gianni Infantino (left) speaks with UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin after addressing the 50th UEFA Ordinary Congress in Brussels on February 12, 2026. (AFP)

in succeeding the Swiss administrator increased his credibility.

OPPOSITION FROM EUROPE'S SMALLER NATIONS

Ceferin said the proposal was a greater threat to the sport than the European Super League plan that UEFA successfully fought in 2021, and said opposition was not just from Europe's bigger nations. "On one side was England, Germany, who you understand don't want that, because this money is not so big for them. But on the other side was San Marino, Cyprus, Liechtenstein ... They said: we're not for sale," he added.

is about, indeed, finding and giving opportunities, access, and resources to world football. Some, unfortunately, don't need and they don't want that others grow, but we need to narrow this gap between the big, big countries and all the others. That's what we have been trying to do in the last 10 years and also in the last 10 weeks, and what we will be continuing to do in the next years."

Infantino, who has support from the African and South American regional blocs, has looked to sideline the confederations and appeal directly to individual members throughout the crisis.

CFU forms part of CONCACAF and Infantino said he had been very happy with how he had been received on the sidelines of an under-14 tournament in the Dominican Republic.

CONCACAF President Victor Montagliani had asked Infantino to stay away from the tournament, saying his presence would overshadow the football. Infantino said the tournament, which was funded by FIFA development money, was an example of the sort of work the governing body had done under his stewardship.

Also on Sunday, six Nordic FIFA members – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the Faroe Islands – met in Helsinki and issued a joint statement backing calls for Infantino's resignation.

In his podcast interview, Ceferin rejected allegations that Europe was obstructing efforts to help poorer football nations and took aim at what he described as attempts to portray UEFA as an entitled elite.

"What I hear is that they play on, you know, arrogant Europe is against us," he said. "But I think someone should remind him (Infantino) that he is a European, and that he was supported by UEFA, which he forgot."

Duhail, Qatar SC discover Gulf Champions League rivals

Doha: Al Duhail and Qatar SC will face tough challenges in the 2026-2027 Gulf Club Champions League after the draw for the third edition of the competition was held online at the Gulf Football Federation headquarters.

Al Duhail were drawn in Group A alongside Saudi Arabia's NEOM SC, Oman's Al Shabab and Yemen's Shaab Hadramaut, while Qatar SC were placed in Group B with UAE's Al Nasr, Iraq's Al Zawraa and Bahrain's Al Riffa. Group C comprises Saudi Arabia's Al Ettifaq, UAE's Ajman, Iraq's Erbil and Kuwait's Kazma.

The expanded competition features 12 clubs, up from eight in the previous edition, making it the largest field in the tournament's history.

The clubs were seeded into four pots based on the AFC club rankings for the 2026-2027 season, with teams from the same member association prevented from being drawn in the same group.

The group stage will begin on October 13 and will be played on a home-and-away basis, with the final round scheduled for February 17, 2027.

The top two teams from each group will advance to the quarter-finals, along with the two best third-placed teams. The quarter-finals will be played over two legs from March 2 to 17, 2027.

The semi-finals and final are scheduled to take place from April 23 to 30, 2027. Qatar's Al Rayyan are the defending champions after beating Saudi Arabia's Al Shabab 3-0 in last season's final to lift the title in the second edition of the competition. The draw was conducted by Hamad Al-Hajri, Director of Stadium Operations at the Federation. Al-Hajri said an opportunity was given to teams that did not participate in the AFC championships.

World Cup winners, FIFA legends say Infantino blinded by power

London: A group of former international players, including World Cup winners and FIFA legends, called for immediate change at world football's governing body, saying its leadership under embattled President Gianni Infantino had been blinded by power.

Infantino has been under mounting pressure to resign after shelving his now abandoned proposal to create a commercial body for FIFA tournament rights and sell off 20% to private investors. The Swiss has shown no signs of walking away from the position he has held since 2016 despite open opposition from several of FIFA's own confederations, including UEFA, the AFC and CONCACAF, amid talks of a potential no-confidence vote.

"We share the exact same concerns as the millions of fans around the world," said former players including France's 1998 men's World Cup winners Emmanuel Petit, Bixente Lizarazu and Robert Pires as well as American former women's world champion Briana Scurry and former England international Lucy Bronze.

"Like them, we have watched the game we love drift away from its core values under FIFA's current leadership. Change is necessary. Power has blurred the current leadership's ability to distinguish between its own interests and what is best for football," the group said.

The group also includes former Peru forward Claudio Pizarro, former Argentina international Juan Sebastian Veron, former Togo captain Emmanuel Adebayor, and FIFA legends

Didier Drogba and David James.

FIFA legends are former players recognised for their contributions to the sport who help promote football on behalf of the global body, playing in exhibition matches and supporting social and charity projects worldwide.

"We call on all stakeholders to step forward and help reshape the future of our sport. There are good people within FIFA who want to rebuild trust, but a new era requires a structural change: a real, direct say for players and fans in how football is run," the group said.

Infantino is up for re-election next year but world soccer's regional powerhouses are discussing whether to move a vote of no confidence in him ahead of the ballot, senior figures familiar with the discussions told Reuters last week.

"Those who step onto the pitch and those who sit in the stands deserve a genuine voice to help reshape football's future together. For the fans, for the players, and for the good of the game, we will be silent no more," the players' group said.

Meanwhile, Former Cameroon star Samuel Eto'o has thrown his support behind Infantino, saying he "hasn't done anything wrong".

Eto'o, president of the Cameroonian football federation, dismissed criticism of Infantino's leadership, suggesting the backlash was driven largely by political manoeuvring ahead of FIFA's presidential election next year.

"I don't think that Infantino has done anything wrong," the former Barcelona, Inter Milan and Chelsea striker told *CNN*.

LIGUE 1

PSG coach Enrique warns players need to compete out of their comfort zone

Reuters
Rennes, France

Paris Saint-Germain players can ill afford to cruise through the season as coach Luis Enrique warned he expected them to play out of their comfort zone. The PSG coach took off both Ousmane Dembele and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia at half-time of their opening game of the new Ligue 1 season, bringing on Mika Godts and Ferran Torres, who scored twice to salvage a point at Stade Rennais on Sunday.

"Football is like that. Paris Saint-Germain have won nothing, nothing," he said of the new season where they defend not only their Ligue 1 title but chase a third successive Champions League victory.

"If you think about what you've won, you're not going to win anything! There is no credit. You have to show every day, every match, every training session, that you're ready. Otherwise, it's easy to relax and start slipping. I wasn't brought up that way. We are always looking to win, and to keep winning, you have to step outside your comfort zone. Is that clear?"

PSG, who won the European Super Cup this month but lost the French version to Racing Lens, played a sluggish first half at Rennes and were 2-0 down at the break after Sebastian Szymanski and Esteban Lepaul scored at Roazhon Park.

But new Spanish signing Ferran Torres, who netted the winner in last month's World Cup final, came on for Dembele and scored twice to ensure a point for the Parisians. "He wasn't bad, was he? He scored two goals, but I'm happy with everyone who came on in a very difficult match because we had a lot of trouble controlling Rennes in the first half," Enrique said.

"They were good on the counterattack and scored two wonderful goals. It was complicated, but it's important for me to see that so



Ferran Torres came off the bench to score a late double on his debut as Paris St Germain rallied from two goals down to draw 2-2 with hosts Stade Rennais in their Ligue 1 season opener. (AFP)

many players are ready. We sign players to go on a long journey with them. It's very positive for him and we're very happy," he said of Ferran Torres' debut.

"We're always looking to find the best players for every match. Places in the team will be more difficult to get than last year, and that's our ambition. I think we had a very good transfer window, and we're still open to different possibilities. Everyone knows how difficult it is for a team to keep winning. And clearly, we still need to improve."

Meanwhile, Torres said: "The game was dif-

ficult, we knew it would be. I just put my hand up then with Fabian's quality, you just have to run and he puts the ball in the right place," he added.

Luis Enrique named two of his big summer signings in 26-year-old Torres and France winger Maghnes Aklouchou on the bench for a game moved from the French capital due to the poor state of the Parc des Princes pitch.

Rennes boss Franck Haise gave a league debut to Adrien Thomasson, who joined the Bretons from the coach's former club Lens over the summer.

CRICKET

India seize control of Colombo Test after Jurel century

Jurel's unbeaten 115 includes nine fours and two sixes, Sri Lanka 8-2 at stumps

AFP
Colombo

India took control on the second day of the second Test against Sri Lanka yesterday, posting 503-9 declared before claiming two quick wickets to leave the hosts reeling at 8-2.

The day belonged to Dhruv Jurel (115 not out), whose second Test hundred helped India tighten their grip on the contest.

Sri Lanka trail by 495 runs, having lost opener Lahiru Udara (one) to a brilliant diving catch by Yashasvi Jaiswal at third slip on a rain-hit day at Colombo's Sinhalese Sports Club ground.

Prabath Jayasuriya was sent in as a nightwatchman, but he survived just seven deliveries before being trapped leg before wicket.

That turned out to be the final ball of the day as play was called off due to bad light.

"We are behind (in) the game now," Sri Lanka paceman Asitha Fernando said after the day's play.

"Hopefully our batters will come out tomorrow and bat out the full day," he added.

"There was not much on the pitch to be honest. When the pitch doesn't offer much assistance, you need to execute the plans you have for batters."

Only 56 overs were possible because of rain on a day Jurel made his mark.

The 25-year-old batsman was rarely troubled by Sri Lanka's bowlers as he stitched together crucial partnerships to carry India beyond the 500-run mark.

The opening day had ended with India on 300-5 and honours even after the tourists elected to bat. But Jurel and wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant (63) added 112 runs for the seventh wicket to put India on a strong footing.



India's Dhruv Jurel celebrates after scoring a century during the second day of the second Test against Sri Lanka at the Sinhalese Sports Club Ground in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

Nervous moments

Pant, who was forced to retire after being struck on the forearm on the opening day, resumed his innings yesterday and continued to attack despite copping several nasty blows to the body.

His entertaining knock contained six fours and two sixes.

One of those sixes sailed into the adjoining tennis courts and disappeared, forcing the umpires to call for a replacement ball.

Pant was dismissed off the first ball after lunch when he failed to clear long-off. Jurel endured a few nervous moments on 99 before reaching the milestone with a quick single to mid-off.

Kamil Mishara swooped on the

ball and a direct hit would have left Jurel stranded one run short of three figures, but luck favoured Jurel. The batter celebrated his hundred by pointing to a tattoo on his bicep.

"Playing Test cricket for India is massive. When we go out there in blue cap we want to give our best," said Jurel.

"When I was on 99, they were bowling good lengths and fielding was sharp. I was waiting for the right moment."

Last man Prasidh Krishna then drove a full toss from Fernando to the boundary to take India past 500, prompting the declaration.

Jurel faced 177 deliveries, hitting nine fours and two sixes.

Fernando was the pick of Sri Lanka's bowlers, finishing with 4-106.

With Pant unable to keep wickets because of the pain from the blow to his forearm, Jurel was handed the gloves when Sri Lanka began their reply.

Fernando and Jaiswal were fined 25 percent of their match fees following a heated exchange on the first day. The pair almost came to blows before their teammates intervened. India lead the two-match series 1-0.

BRIEF SCORES: Sri Lanka 8 for 2 (Prasidh 1-1) trail India 503 for 9 dec (Padikkal 117, Jurel 115*) by 495 runs.

FOCUS

Cummins eyes ODI return ahead of 'big' South Africa Test series

AFP
Mackay

Skipper **Pat Cummins** said he "can't wait" to play in Australia's first Test series in South Africa since the infamous "Sandpapergate" affair and he intends to use one-day games beforehand to prepare.

The next assignment for Australia after drawing a two-Test series against Bangladesh are three ODIs in Zimbabwe and another three in South Africa in late September.

They then play Tests in Durban, Gqeberha and Cape Town in October.

Cummins indicated he could miss the Zimbabwe leg, but would make himself available for some of the South Africa white-ball games.

It is likely to be a similar scenario for fellow quicks Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood.

"I'm not sure I should say this, but I think the focus is on the Test series," said Cummins after their innings and 51-run thrashing of Bangladesh in Mackay on Sunday.

"So a lot of the white-ball (series), and how we play that, would be with an eye to the red ball."

"So I'd imagine it'd be one, two, probably a maximum of three games out of those six."

Cummins, who remains Australia's official ODI captain, has played just two from a possible 28 matches in the format since the 2023 World Cup.

Hazlewood told reporters in Mackay he too expected to play some of the 50-over series while Starc said he would "do what he's told".

All three have prioritised Tests over limited-overs cricket in recent years.

The Tests in South Africa will be Australia's first in the country since a 2018 ball-tampering scandal rocked the sport.

Steve Smith was banned for a year and sacked as captain after conspiring to alter the ball using sandpaper during the third Test in Cape Town, while David Warner was suspended for 12 months.

Cummins called the series "big" with revenge on his mind

after Australia lost the World Test Championship final to the Proteas at Lord's last year.

"We had a big series against them a couple of years ago in Australia (in 2022-23) and we probably exceeded expectations and played really well," said Cummins of their 2-0 series win.

"They got us back at Lord's last year and outplayed us. So it's going to be big in their home conditions and places we have haven't played for quite a while."

"Even the difference between Durban to, say, Cape Town can be quite different styles of pitches."

"That's why I love playing Test cricket. It's all different conditions, different opponents, different parts of the world. Can't wait."

Only Cummins, Starc, Hazlewood, Smith, Nathan Lyon, and Matt Renshaw have played Test cricket in South Africa.

Opener Renshaw is likely to hold his place despite a tepid return in Mackay after three years away, with the big question whether Marnus Labuschagne should be on the plane.

The number three made just 36 runs in three knocks against Bangladesh and has not scored a century since 2023.

"I did say a couple of days ago - and I think it still stands - that he's been batting fantastically well off the field," said Cummins. "But it doesn't mean much. You've got to convert that into runs out there."



SPOTLIGHT

Carse dropped from England squad after nightclub incident

AFP
London

Brydon Carse has been withdrawn from the second Test against Pakistan, while an incident outside a nightclub is investigated by the Cricket Regulator, in the latest off-field setback for England.

Videos on social media appeared to show fast bowler Carse in handcuffs, being led away by four police officers following an incident at a nightclub in Derby, central England, on Saturday.

"Following a referral from the ECB, the Cricket Regulator have confirmed that they will investigate events on Saturday night in Derby," the England and Wales Cricket Board said in a statement.

"Brydon Carse will no longer be available for selection for the Second Men's Test against Pakistan while this investigation is ongoing and the full facts are obtained."

In the videos Carse was seen talking to Durham team-mate Matthew Potts, with former England captain Ben Stokes also pictured in the background.

Carse has not featured for England in any format since the finish of the Ashes in January, with a hand injury hampering his start to 2026 and forcing him to miss the Indian Premier League.

He was not selected for the first Test last week, which England won by an innings and 103 runs inside three days at Headingley.

It is the latest in a series of alcohol-fuelled controversies that have dogged England since a disastrous tour of New Zealand and Australia at the end of last year.

After white-ball captain Harry Brook was involved in an altercation with a nightclub bouncer in Wellington and videos circulated of England players appearing drunk on nights out during the 4-1



Ashes series thrashing by Australia, a curfew on players going out was introduced in January.

But in June, Stokes and Gus Atkinson were given a written warning and stood down from the second Test against New Zealand after an incident at a London nightclub which came after they broke the curfew.

Stokes subsequently announced his shock retirement from international cricket during the third Test against New Zealand, with Brendon McCullum

also axed as the red-ball coach two weeks later.

Joe Root has taken over as England Test captain for a second time but said he would not impose a curfew on players.

"My view on curfews is I don't think they work, and if you want guys to take responsibility on the field they've got to be able to feel they can be grown adults off it and make good strong decisions off it," Root told Sky Sports.

PACE BOWLER NAVEEN RETURNS TO AFGHANISTAN SQUAD FOR INDIA T20IS

Fast bowler Naveen-ul-Haq will return to Afghanistan's Twenty20 international squad for the three-match series against India after a two-year absence, with the aim of building the side for future events.

The 26-year-old missed Afghanistan's T20I matches against West Indies and the T20 World Cup in 2026 due to a stress fracture in his right shoulder.

"Naveen's return provides an important boost to the pace attack, giving Afghanistan a strong combination of pace, experience and variety," the Afghanistan Cricket Board said in a news release.

The three matches - on September 13, 15 and 17 - will be hosted in New Delhi as a home series for war-torn Afghanistan, whose "home" matches are played either in India or the United Arab Emirates.

It will be the first time a team will host India on Indian soil. Ibrahim Zadran will captain the T20I side, taking over from Rashid Khan.

The squad also features an experienced spin-bowling group consisting of Rashid, Noor Ahmad and Nangeyalia Kharoti, while senior all-rounder Mohammad Nabi and Gulbadin Naib

provide additional experience and balance to the side. Afghanistan continued their international rise with a thumping 4-0 over Ireland in a one-day international series this month, qualifying for next year's 50-over World Cup.

Squad: Ibrahim Zadran (captain), Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Noor Rahman, Sediqullah Atal, Darwish Rasooli, Azmatullah Omarzai, Gulbadin Naib, Mohammad Nabi, Rashid Khan, Nangeyalia Kharoti, Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Abdullah Ahmadzai, Naveen-ul-Haq.

CYCLING

Vuelta stage three abandoned in dangerous weather conditions

AFP
Font-Romeu, France

Stage three of the Vuelta a Espana was abandoned inside the final few kilometres because of a dangerous hailstorm yesterday.

Riders, including red jersey-wearing race leader Tadej Pogacar, pulled off the road to take shelter in a hotel amid the severe weather conditions in the Pyrenees. Mats Wenzel and Lorenzo Fortunato had been leading ahead of the peloton when the decision was made.

Riders were reaching the top of the penultimate climb on the way to the Font Romeu finish line at the end of the 174-kilometre course from Gruissan.

Conditions had been fine at the start, with six riders attacking early on, including Soudal Quick-Step's Ethan Hayter, who was pipped by Pogacar in the opening stage individual time-trial. The breakaway extended

their advantage to more than two-and-a-half minutes but the peloton gradually reeled the escapees back in, with Pogacar's UAE Team Emirates-XRG squad working hard to keep the gap under control.

Some riders in the bunch pulled to the side of the road to take shelter from the hailstones, while Pogacar called for the peloton to turn off route and head into a nearby hotel.

Crosswinds split the peloton on the exposed roads, with general classification contender Felix Gall suffering, but the Austrian managed to recover.

With around 60km remaining, riders could see the dark clouds and rainy conditions awaiting them ahead, and which ultimately forced the stage to be abandoned.

Rain and then hail lashed down with around 25km remaining as UAE picked up the pace to close

down three riders still out in front. Wenzel was soon the last man standing from the breakaway as he kept plugging away despite the inclement weather, and he was joined by Fortunato.

Some riders in the bunch pulled to the side of the road to take shelter from the hailstones, while Pogacar called for the peloton to turn off route and head into a nearby hotel. Race organisers then confirmed the stage had been abandoned because of the weather.

Stage four starts and finishes in Andorra today, running 104.8km in the mountains with several categorised climbs, which should provide a solid indication of which riders expect to finish high in the general classification. Slovenian cycling superstar Pogacar is the overwhelming favourite to win the race and complete the set of Grand Tour victories, having won the Giro d'Italia in 2024. Only a major upset will prevent him finishing the race in Granada on September 13.

FOCUS

Banned Vondrousova appeals doping suspension to CAS

AFP
Lausanne

Former Wimbledon champion **Marketa Vondrousova** has appealed against her four-year doping suspension to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, the international body said yesterday.

“CAS can confirm an appeal,” a spokeswoman told AFP when asked about the Czech 2023 Wimbledon champion, who was sanctioned by the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) for refusing to take an out-of-competition doping test in December 2025.

A hearing date has not yet been set, but proceedings typically take place in the months following the appeal.

It would be held behind closed doors unless Vondrousova re-

quests a public hearing - a very rare occurrence - with the final ruling issued several months later.

The ITIA said that Vondrousova had failed to open the door to an anti-doping officer. Her suspension is due to run until June 21, 2030, and she has not played on the WTA Tour since January.

Vondrousova has slipped from inside the world's top 50 to number 153 in her absence.

Vondrousova initially responded to the ban by saying she had “never doped”.

The 27-year-old claimed in April that she was scared when the officer rang the bell “without properly identifying themselves or following protocol”.

Players are required to log their whereabouts for an allotted hour each day so that authorities can conduct anti-doping tests outside of competition.



She has said that her fear was partly due to the knife attack on her compatriot and fellow former Wimbledon winner Petra Kvitova at her home in 2016.

“In that moment, fear clouded

my judgement and I just couldn't process the situation rationally,” Vondrousova said.

“After what happened to Petra, we don't take strangers at our door lightly”

Last month, an independent tribunal ruled she had provided “no compelling justification” for refusing a test, noting she had taken her dog for a walk 10 minutes later.

“This is a very unfortunate manner in which the player made a decision in the heat of the moment to refuse doping control, in a state of stress and anxiety, with significant consequences,” the tribunal said.

American world number three Jessica Pegula called the suspension “harsh”, comparing it to the far lighter punishments handed out to Jannik Sinner and Iga Swiatek.

“I just don't think that's fair. I think the sentencing is so harsh,” Pegula said at Wimbledon in June.

Sinner accepted a three-month ban last year after reaching an agreement with the World Anti-

Doping Agency (WADA) in 2024. The Italian men's world number one had tested positive for the anabolic steroid clostebol, before being cleared by an independent tribunal who determined he was not to blame.

Six-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek took a one-month ban in 2024 after testing positive for a banned substance.

“So I don't quite understand the difference between that and then obviously what happened with Sinner and Iga. They justified what the rules were and why it was the way it was,” Pegula said.

Vondrousova has a career high ranking of sixth, two months after her Wimbledon triumph three years ago.

She also reached the 2019 French Open final and won a singles silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021.

MOTORSPORT

Mercedes no longer have the fastest car: Antonelli

Reuters
Zandvoort, Netherlands

McLaren have taken a big step forward and Mercedes no longer have the quickest car in Formula One, championship leader Kimi Antonelli said after Sunday's Dutch Grand Prix.

McLaren's reigning champion Lando Norris celebrated his second win in a row from pole position at Zandvoort, with Antonelli and Mercedes teammate George Russell second and third ahead of Ferrari pair Lewis Hamilton and Charles Leclerc.

“We're clearly not the fastest car anymore on the grid,” said Antonelli, who won five races in a row earlier in the season.

“We're probably second or third, at least in today's race, and McLaren has taken a huge step, especially since Hungary, since the big upgrade package they brought.”

Norris, who lost out to Antonelli at the race restart and then had to overtake him on track, questioned that assertion however.

“I don't think it's true. I think if I didn't get Kimi when I overtook him, I don't think I would have won the race,” he said.

“For once I would give myself a little bit of credit that I feel like I'm doing a better job than everyone, and I think that can also make a difference.

“We certainly have a car now capable of beating them ... but I think they have a better all-round performing car than what we do.”

Zandvoort, and Budapest's Hungaroring before that, played to McLaren's strengths but some of the tracks coming up may be less favourable.

Ferrari can be expected to go well at their home grand prix at Monza early next month, with up-



Mercedes' Italian driver Kimi Antonelli celebrates on the podium after the Dutch Grand Prix at the Circuit Zandvoort, western Netherlands. (AFP)

grades in the pipeline, while Antonelli faces hefty grid penalties for an engine change.

A TOUGHER RIDE

Mercedes are still way ahead of Ferrari and McLaren in the constructors' championship and scored more points (46 to McLaren's 43 and Ferrari's 31) than anyone else over the weekend.

“We have a strong car in certain areas. It's not like last year where we were pretty good everywhere,” said Norris.

“We're very, very strong in high speed, and that's the place we've improved the car the most, is high-speed performance. No one matches us in high speed, and that's a good thing.

“But the advantage that they (Mercedes) have to us in slow speed is also crazy. And therefore, I don't have the confidence to say 'yeah, I can easily fight for a championship for the rest of the season.’

“I know I've just won two races in a row and had two poles in a row, but at the minute I don't have the car I need to fight for a championship,” added the Briton, who is 83 points behind Antonelli with another 11 rounds remaining unless the situation in the Middle East forces a calendar change.

Mercedes boss Toto Wolff said cost-cap restrictions meant Mercedes did not have the money to put developments on the car as fast as they might like to.

“We are trying to evenly split

that through the season based on our calculations of when we can bring the biggest updates and optimising the championship points,” he told reporters.

“So the ride has been a bit tougher than at the beginning of the year.”

McLaren principal Andrea Stella said he expected Mercedes to accelerate their car's development regardless.

“I'm sure their car in the wind tunnel is quite a bit faster than the car they have on track,” said the Italian.

“And they will want to now convert some of this potential into upgrades that make it to the real car. I'm just pretty sure that they will have upgrades.”

TENNIS

Gauff powers past Pegula to win US Open warm-up in Cincinnati

AFP
Cincinnati

Coco Gauff made a statement Sunday with the US Open approaching, dominating Jessica Pegula 6-2, 6-4 to win her first title of 2026 at the WTA 1000 in Cincinnati.

World number four Gauff claimed her first WTA title since last October in Wuhan, having come up short in finals in Miami and Rome this year.

Her victory over third-ranked Pegula gave her a second Cincinnati crown. Gauff earned her first in 2023, going on to claim the first of her two Grand Slam titles at the US Open that year.

The first all-American WTA final in Cincinnati since Rosie Casals beat Nancy Richey in 1970 was a lopsided affair.

Gauff insisted it shouldn't be considered a barometer for the US Open, but admitted it was a welcome confidence boost.

“I don't think that this is an indicator that I'm going to do well in New York or anything like that to be honest,”

Gauff said, but added: “(I'm going in) knowing that I can figure out these matches (even if) I'm not playing my best, but also knowing that I can play that great tennis that I felt I was playing this week.”

“Hopefully I can use the experience here in New York.”

Gauff polished off an impressive tournament with victory in 75 minutes and will head to New York riding a wave of confidence for the start of the US Open next Sunday.

It's a far cry from an early exit in Cincinnati last year, which Gauff said left her “in the parking lot in tears” after she coughed up 16 double-faults in defeat.

“It's a big difference, what a year can make,” added Gauff, who was so bothered by her service struggles this time last year that she hired a new coach days before the US Open.

“Last year I was just frustrated with my game, and I felt like I was declining,” she said.

“It's not something any player wants to feel. You always want to



Coco Gauff celebrates with the trophy after defeating Jessica Pegula to win the Cincinnati Open in Mason, Ohio. (AFP)

feel like you're getting better, at the worst, like just plateauing.”

This time around Gauff was rock-solid on serve and Pegula, coming off a hard-fought win over defending champion Iga Swiatek, had no answer for Gauff's speed and aggression.

Gauff broke Pegula twice for a 4-0 lead and was up 5-0 before Pegula got on the scoreboard, holding serve and clawing back a break.

It was a brief reprieve as Gauff broke again to pocket the opening set after 34 minutes.

The second set was more of the same, Gauff breaking on the way to a 3-0 lead and Pegula playing catch-up.

Gauff sealed victory on her first match point to conclude 12 days of tennis at the sprawling Midwest venue.

Gauff's win squared the career series between the two at five wins each. Gauff won her second match this season against Pegula after defeating her compatriot in a Wimbledon quarter-final.

Pegula was not displeased with her own performance heading into the final Grand Slam of the season.

“I don't think I played bad but you played a very high level, it was not fun to play against,” she told Gauff during the trophy ceremony.

“You have amazing momentum heading into the US Open.”

Qatar enter Asian Junior Handball Championship quarter-finals



Qatar qualified for the quarter-finals of the 11th Asian Junior (U-19) Championship held in Amman. Yesterday, Qatar scored their fourth straight win in the final group stage match against Syria (42-29). Qatar topped Group B with eight points. Earlier, Qatar had beaten Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iran.

SPOTLIGHT

Fils stuns Tiafoe to claim Cincinnati title

AFP
Cincinnati

Arthur Fils surged past Frances Tiafoe 6-3, 1-6, 6-0 to win his first ATP Masters 1000 title in Cincinnati on Sunday.

The 22-year-old bagged his biggest career title and, with the US Open starting in one week, he is projected to jump from 21st in the world rankings to a career-high 11th. Fils was on his phone to his parents only seconds after securing the victory, calling his father back home after becoming the first French player to win a Masters 1000 since Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in Toronto in 2014.

“That was my dad on the phone, now I need to call my mom,” the delighted winner said at the trophy ceremony, lamenting only that his father missed one of his tournaments for the first time this year. “Wow, that feels good, that feels good,” Fils said. “It's a lot of training, a lot of things, a lot of sacrifice.”

“Injury” added Fils, who missed much of 2025 with a back injury and months this year with a hip ailment. “To be able to win one title



like this means a lot to me.”

Fils was also cognizant of the fact that it was the first time two Black players have met in an ATP Masters 1000 final, and he hoped it could inspire others. “If they can watch us playing some great final like this and they can dream about it, it's nice,” he said.

Fils swept through the opening set, dropping just three points behind his serve. Tiafoe turned the tables as Fils's errors mounted in the second, but after receiving treatment before the third set Tiafoe was no match for the surging Frenchman in the third.

Tiafoe saved two match points in the final

game, but Fils set up another with a lob and was able to celebrate as Tiafoe sent a forehand over the baseline to end it after 98 minutes. Fils had blazed through the opening games, breaking Tiafoe on the way to a 3-0 lead and dropping just one point in the first three games.

He dictated the rallies from the baseline and even as Tiafoe began to find his range the American was unable to apply any pressure on Fils's serve, Fils finishing off the opening set in 29 minutes with his eighth ace.

Fils suffered his first setback in the second set, saving three break points in the second game but firing a forehand long on a fourth as Tiafoe roared to a 3-0 lead.

The American grabbed all of his chances to level the match after just 54 minutes, but he then called for the trainer for a massage on his right hip which has bothered him in recent weeks. Fils regrouped to dominate again, breaking Tiafoe twice for a 4-0 lead in a storming finish. Fils said some quick reflection after the second set proved valuable to him in the third.

The result marked the second time that Tiafoe has lost a final in Cincinnati. He fell to Jannik Sinner in 2024.

LA LIGA

Barcelona launch title defence with demolition of Elche

‘This is a fantastic start for us. It give us the confidence we need’

AFP

Barcelona

Spanish champions Barcelona cruised to a 5-0 win over Elche on Sunday in their La Liga opener with Raphinha and Fermin Lopez scoring twice each and Anthony Gordon setting up two goals on his debut.

Earlier, Atletico Madrid salvaged a 2-2 draw against Villarreal despite having defender Robin Le Normand sent off.

After watching Jose Mourinho’s Real Madrid defeat Espanyol 2-1 on Saturday with a late winner, Barcelona’s display warned the Portuguese coach that the Catalans will not relinquish the title easily.

Karim Adeyemi also struck on his debut as Barca made light work of a vulnerable Elche side at the Martinez Valero stadium.

Hansi Flick started with several regular starters on the bench as they continue to get up to speed following the World Cup.

Teenage winger Lamine Yamal, a key part of the triumphant Spain squad, did start on the right but was far from his best, although it did not matter given Barca’s otherwise sparkling display. “Five goals against this team is good, Elche play fantastic football,” Flick told reporters.

“We are really happy that we won 5-0, three points, this is a fantastic start for us. It give us the confidence we need for the next matches.”

Brazil international Raphinha lined up as the team’s number nine, after Robert Lewandowski and Ferran Torres left the club, and shone. Barcelona are still looking for a striker after Atletico Madrid rejected their bid to sign Julian Alvarez. “I’ll leave that to the president,” said Raphinha, when asked if Barca needed to sign a number nine. “I am comfortable (anywhere) on the pitch.”

Raphinha was cut down in the box by Victor Chust and stroked home the resulting penalty after 14 minutes to get Flick’s team on their way. Rapid winger Adeyemi, playing on the left, started shakily but grew into the game and doubled Barca’s lead before the break after Raphinha unselfishly set him up.



Barcelona's Lamine Yamal (left) battles for the ball with Elche's Victor Chust during the La Liga match at Martinez Valero Stadium in Elche, Spain. (AFP)

In the second half, former Newcastle United winger Gordon, on as a substitute, teed up Raphinha for his second and then supplied Lopez for Barca’s fourth in an electric and impressive cameo.

Youngster Xavi Espart played in Lopez, who endured a difficult summer after missing Spain’s World Cup triumph through injury, for his second to seal Barcelona’s comfortable triumph. “We ended up feeling good... it was a great game from the team, we’re still getting up to speed and we have to carry on like this,” said Lopez. “I was really excited to start the season well, it was tough for me (this summer)... and I’m happy.”

Flick’s high-line defence showed the occasional sign of its usual frailty but goalkeeper Joan Garcia did well when called on to keep a clean sheet.

In the capital, Giuliano Simeone grabbed Atletico a draw after Gerard Moreno and Georges Mikautadze’s penalties put Villarreal in front following Marc Pubill’s 59th-minute opener.

Atletico coach Diego Simeone brought Julian Alvarez on as a second-half substitute to a chorus of boos from home supporters. The forward walked down the tunnel at the end by himself while his team-mates were thanking the fans after securing their draw.

SPOTLIGHT

Amorim starts Serie A life with Milan win

AFP

Rome

Former Manchester United boss Ruben Amorim made a winning start to life in Serie A as his AC Milan side opened their campaign with a 2-1 victory at Torino on Sunday, after Juventus got underway with an unconvincing win.

The Rossoneri turned to Amorim after finishing fifth last season, and the Portuguese has been provided with an overhauled squad as the giants look to challenge their city rivals and defending champions, Inter Milan.

Amorim had to wait until the hour mark for his side to capitalise on their dominance in Piedmont. The breakthrough came shortly after the hour thanks to teenage debutant Alphonso Davies’ deft opener, which completely removed the shackles from Milan.

Adrien Rabiot doubled the lead minutes later when he ghosted onto Samuel Chukwueze’s back-post cross. Marquee summer signing Goncalo Ramos, who joined from Paris Saint-Germain for 74mn euros (\$86mn), failed to find the net but caused the Torino defence no end of trouble. The gloss was somewhat taken off the result in the dying moments of stoppage time as Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan was beaten by a looping volley from Che Adams. “The most important thing is to win,” Amorim said. “We talk about ways of playing, but there is one goal in football, winning.”

Atalanta, also with a new man at the helm in



Torino's Giovanni Simeone (left) vies for the ball with AC Milan's Koni De Winter in Turin on Sunday. (AFP)

the shape of former Chelsea and Napoli boss Maurizio Sarri, kicked off their season with a 2-1 win at home to Sassuolo. The 2024 Europa League winners took an early lead courtesy of

a Giacomo Raspadori piledriver, before Cas Odenthal hit back from close range for the visitors on 55 minutes.

But Nikola Krstovic took advantage of sloppy defending 10 minutes later to ensure Atalanta would earn all three points.

Earlier, Juventus secured a 1-0 away win against newly promoted Frosinone, but failed to impress in their campaign-opener.

Juve, who finished a disappointing sixth last season, secured all three points thanks to Gleison Bremer’s 22nd-minute header. Luciano Spalletti’s side then dominated proceedings but failed to put the game beyond doubt.

Goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario, on loan from Tottenham Hotspur, had an issue with cramp and had to be substituted late on as a precaution, according to Spalletti, which nearly cost Juve dearly, as Frosinone pressed hard in stoppage time and hit the crossbar.

The Bianconeri, however, secured the result they needed, following in the footsteps of reigning champions Inter Milan, who thrashed another newly-promoted side, Monza, 4-1 on Saturday in the season opener. “I would have preferred the team to show it has an identity, and it did that,” Spalletti said. “At certain moments we’re a bit light, we’re not good at bringing that determination. But it can happen, especially at the start. We’ll work on it.”

Lecce made a strong start to the season against the third promoted side, Venezia, on Sunday as they defeated their hosts 2-0 courtesy of second-half goals from Olaf Gorter and Tiago Gabriel.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Van Dijk says Liverpool must improve on ‘unacceptable’ season

AFP

Liverpool

Virgil van Dijk said Liverpool “need to show a reaction” from a bitterly disappointing season that cost Arne Slot his job as manager, but called for patience with new boss Andoni Iraola.

The Reds needed a 99th-minute equaliser from the penalty spot by Dominik Szoboszlai to rescue a 2-2 draw at Newcastle on the opening weekend of the Premier League season.

Slot guided Liverpool to glory and a 20th league title in his debut campaign in 2024/25, but paid the price for finishing fifth last season when he was dismissed in May.

Many of the same flaws were in evidence in Iraola’s first outing at St James’ Park as Newcastle sliced open the Liverpool defence on the counter-attack. But they twice came from behind to avoid a losing start to the new season.

“It’s absolutely normal in any type of profession, work, whatever you do, if you come in new and you have new plans and new ideas, then it takes a bit of time with new players,” said Van Dijk.

“It’s down to us to do it as soon as we can, as soon as possible, because we want to improve, we want to win, we want to be better. That’s what we are going to try to do. We need to show a reaction from last year, that we are much better than last year, because this was very unacceptable.”

Iraola has not been aided by a lack of new arrivals in the transfer



market. Despite the departure of club legend Mohamed Salah and a long-term injury to Hugo Ekitike, Liverpool have only added Spanish winger Victor Munoz in attacking areas as well as defenders Jeremy Jacquet and Ronald Araujo.

Paris Saint-Germain’s two-time Champions League winner Bradley Barcola has been linked with a move to Anfield, while two bids for Brighton winger Yankuba Minteh have reportedly been turned down.

“Everyone wants to see quality arrive regardless and I fully trust the club and the board to make the right decisions,” Van Dijk added. “That’s the only thing I can say, so let’s see what we are going to do.”

Ex-Liverpool star Fabinho reunited with Salah at Trabzonspor

Istanbul: Brazilian midfielder Fabinho signed a two-year contract with Trabzonspor, the Turkish club announced, where his former Liverpool teammate Mohamed Salah has made an impressive start.

The 32-year-old was a free agent after three seasons at Saudi club Al Ittihad, and will earn 4mn euros (\$4.66mn) per year the Black Sea coast club said, a far cry from the 17 million euros they will pay Salah.

Fabinho was one of the key figures behind Monaco’s French league title in 2017 before joining Liverpool the following year. With the Reds, he won the Champions League in 2019, the Premier League in 2020, and the FA Cup in 2022 as one of the cornerstones of Jurgen Klopp’s system.

The Egyptian forward, who was welcomed as a hero in Trabzon in early August scored twice on Sunday in his first Turkish league start.

Trabzonspor finished third in the Turkish top-flight last season and take on Hungary’s Ferencváros on Thursday in the second leg of their Europa League playoff tie, trailing 1-0.

IRAQ’S AUSTRALIAN COACH ARNOLD RENEWS CONTRACT FOR SIX MONTHS

Iraq’s Australian coach Graham Arnold has renewed his contract with the team until 2027, the country’s FA said.

After weeks of speculation, the IFA made the announcement at a press conference attended by the 63-year-old, confirming he would remain in charge through the Gulf Cup in Saudi Arabia in September, as well as the Asian Cup early next year.

“I have renewed my contract for six months and this decision is in my best interest and in the

best interest of the Iraq national team, although the association offered me a four-year extension,” Arnold was quoted as saying by the Iraqi News Agency.

Arnold guided Iraq to this year’s World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico, ending a 40-year absence from the tournament. However, Iraq exited at the group stage after losing all of their Group I matches against Norway, France and Senegal.

JUVENTUS BOSS SPALLETTI DEMANDS MORE FROM KOLO MUANI

Juventus manager Luciano Spalletti said new signing Randal Kolo Muani has a lot of work to do if he is to recapture his best form after the French forward failed to shine in their 1-0 win at Frosinone Calcio on Sunday.

The 27-year-old has returned to Juve for a second spell after spending half a season on loan at the Turin club last year, signing a five-year contract in a deal worth 38 million euros (\$44.35 million) earlier this month.

Juve have signed the former Paris St Germain forward as a replacement for Dusan Vlahovic following the Serbian’s departure to Besiktas.

In his first spell at Juve, Kolo Muani scored 10 goals in 22 appearances before PSG loaned to Tottenham Hotspur for the 2025-26 season.

Spalletti said that Kolo Muani should have been on the scoresheet in their Serie A opener on Sunday. Brazilian centre back Gleison Bremer netted the only goal of the game. “We went out and signed him (Kolo Muani), we’ve looked after him and we know his worth, but he needs to realise he hasn’t played for two years and there must be a reason for that,” he said.

Can Emery do it again? Player churn leaves Spaniard facing greatest Villa challenge

Birmingham: Unai Emery has proven time and again at his various clubs that he can deliver even after his crown jewels are sold on from under his nose but the rebuilding challenge he now faces at Aston Villa might be his biggest so far.

The Spaniard watched aghast on Sunday as Europa League winners Villa were dismantled 4-0 in their Premier League opener at Brighton and Hove Albion. A surprising result on paper perhaps, but Villa fans who made the trip to the south coast might have feared the worst. Only five of the players that started the Europa League final against Freiburg on that memorable night in Istanbul in May, began the match at Brighton.

England duo Morgan Rogers and Ezri Konsa have joined Chelsea and Arsenal respectively, Lucas Digne has gone to Paris

St Germain and Youri Tielemans is now a Manchester United player.

It could get worse too with striker Ollie Watkins left out on Sunday with his Villa future in doubt. Villa also sold some of their prime assets ahead of last season yet Emery’s side still finished fourth and claimed the club’s first European title for 44 years.

The endless player churn has become a recurring theme of Villa’s rise under Emery. Yet while previous overhauls have been absorbed without derailing progress, the scale of this summer’s departures leaves far greater uncertainty over whether Villa can remain among England’s elite.

Not that he was complaining about the cards he has been dealt on Sunday - vowing instead to forge another team capable of challenging English football’s elite.

“We know, we had it before here. We had it in different moments. In four years we had it maybe five times in different circumstances,” Emery said.

“But we are going forward, moving always forward. My responsibility is to try to analyse, to find solutions and for the transfer window we have 10 days to find solutions, and we have then of course a way to find solutions with the players we have and we are doing that. We always recover and came back from situations like that and I’m confident we will now.”

Emery also pointed to the fact that after five Premier League games last season they had three points and had scored one goal. “Hopefully this season can go the same way as that,” the former Valencia, Sevilla, Paris St Germain, Arsenal and Villarreal coach, said.

Emery offered a cryptic response to questions about the future of England striker Watkins when asked why he was missing from the match-day squad. “Ask him. I only can answer it by silence,” he said.

Things began to unravel for Villa after eight minutes when Victor Lindelof scored into his own net. Maxim De Cuyper turned in a cross by Georginio Rutter after 18 minutes before Jack Hinshelwood’s quick-fire brace before halftime left Villa reeling.

That was not even the worst of it as new signing Joao Gomes kicked out an opponent and was sent off. While Villa will have to dust themselves down, it was the perfect start for Brighton who have also had to contend with the loss of high-calibre players such as Jan Paul van Hecke and Danny Welbeck.

