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CRICKET | Page 2

Four-wicket
Robinson stars as
Pakistan collapse
in second Test



FOOTBALL | Page 4

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GULF TIMES

SPORT

TENNIS

Djokovic eyes elusive
25th major at US
Open with Zverev
as main hurdle

Page 3

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Dominant Sadd rout Qatar SC to maintain perfect start

Otavio scored two early goals, while Abdurisag, Firmino, Claudinho and Afif were also on target

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd produced another emphatic attacking display as the defending champions thrashed Qatar SC 6-2 at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday to make it two wins from two in the Qatar Stars League.

Paulo Otavio led the rout with two early goals, while Yusuf Abdurisag, Roberto Firmino, Claudinho and Akram Afif were also on target for Al Sadd. Joao Pedro and Pau Prim scored for Qatar SC.

Al Sadd took control from the outset, with Otavio opening the scoring in the 15th minute after converting an assist from Afif inside the box.

The Brazilian doubled the lead seven minutes later, deflecting Pedro Miguel's inviting cross from the right into the net.

The defending champions continued to dominate and added a third in the 29th minute when Abdurisag drilled home from close range following another assist from Afif. Qatar SC came out with a more organised defence after the break and began to pose a greater threat. Their efforts earned them a penalty in the 62nd minute after Claudinho brought down Mohamed Amine with a back tackle inside the box. Pedro made no mistake from the spot to reduce the deficit.

Al Sadd quickly restored their three-goal advantage. Firmino collected a cross from Hashim Ali, produced a neat roulette inside the box and fired home in the 71st minute. Qatar SC pulled another goal back in the 82nd minute when Pau Prim found space inside the box before firing a diagonal effort into the net.

But Al Sadd finished strongly. Claudinho flicked Younes El Hannach's cross into the net in the 85th minute before Afif completed the rout in stoppage time, leaving a defender and goalkeeper stranded before finding the net. Al Sadd almost added a seventh in the closing stages when Hassan Al Haydos sent a flying free-kick narrowly past the top-right corner.

In another six-goal encounter, Al Ahli fought back from behind to draw 3-3 with Lusail at Al Thumama Stadium, with both teams earning their first points of the season. Julian Draxler scored twice for Al Ahli, while Ismail Mohammed also found the net. Rodrigo Moreno struck twice for Lusail and Farhad Ismail added the other goal.

DUHAIL, ARABI SEEK FIRST WIN
Al Duhail and Al Arabi will look to claim their first victory of the season when they meet at Al Bayt Stadium today.
Al Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi said his team are ready for what he expects to be a difficult encounter against an Al Arabi side boasting a strong squad.
“We performed well during the first-round match against Al Sailiya, and we



Al Sadd's Paulo Otavio (right) celebrates with Roberto Firmino and Pedro Miguel after scoring against Qatar SC at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

will strive to continue delivering the same technical level, but at the same time we realise the difficulty of the task against Al Arabi,” Belmadi said.

Al Duhail opened their campaign with a win over Al Sailiya, while Al Arabi were held to a 2-2 draw by Al Shamal.

Al Arabi assistant coach Dumitru Russo said the coaching staff had used the past few days to assess the team's opening performance and identify the details that prevented them from collecting all three points. He stressed that the match against Al Duhail would require complete concentration and tactical discipline throughout the 90 minutes.

Russo added that the draw against Al Shamal had provided extra motivation for the players to respond, with the squad

showing strong determination in training ahead of the match.

In another match today, Al Shahania and Al Sailiya will also be chasing their first points when they meet at Lusail Stadium.

Al Shahania coach Younes Ali said preparations had gone well, with his players aware of the importance of the encounter.

He acknowledged that Al Sailiya are a strong and well-organised side but expressed confidence in his players' ability to produce a good performance and secure a positive result.

Ali said Al Shahania had managed to impose their style and create several chances in their previous match, but stressed that converting those opportunities into goals remains an area the team must improve.

Al Sailiya coach Mirghani AlaZein,

Rodrigo late strike rescues Lusail in six-goal thriller against Ahli

Doha: Al Ahli and Lusail SC shared the points in a dramatic 3-3 draw in the second round of the Qatar Stars League at Al Thumama Stadium yesterday, with Rodrigo Moreno scoring a stoppage-time equaliser in an entertaining six-goal encounter.

Julian Draxler gave Al Ahli an early lead from the penalty spot in the seventh minute after Lusail's Erik Exposito was penalised for a handball following a VAR review. Lusail responded quickly, with Rodrigo Moreno converting from the spot in the 12th minute after Al Ahli's Benjamin Bourigeaud was penalised for handball.

The visitors then completed the turnaround just before half-time. Naif Al Hadhrami won possession in midfield and released Farhad Ismael with a superb pass, allowing him to finish and put Lusail 2-1 ahead.

Al Ahli restored parity six minutes after the restart when Ismail Mohammed found the net in the 51st minute.

Draxler then struck again from the penalty spot in the 63rd minute after Mohammed Ayash was penalised for handball, putting Al Ahli back in front.

Lusail refused to give up and were rewarded deep into stoppage time when Rodrigo scored his second of the night in the fourth minute of added time to secure a 3-3 draw.

The result gave both teams their first points of the season.

LUSAIL FANS PROVIDE COLOURFUL BACKDROP

Lusail's growing fan base added to the atmosphere at Al Thumama Stadium, with supporters turning out in large numbers to cheer for the team.

The supporters waved flags and backed the players in a lively display that offered an encouraging sign for the club's efforts to build a stronger fan identity.

The turnout underlined the importance of creating a matchday experience that appeals to different sections of the community and encourages supporters to feel connected to the club.

While still a developing relationship between Lusail and its fans, the support in the stands provided a positive foundation that the club will hope to build on throughout the season.



Al Ahli and Lusail SC players battle for the ball at Al Thumama Stadium.

meanwhile, said his side will enter the match determined to collect all three points. “We will work on correcting the mistakes that appeared in the Al Duhail match and avoiding their repetition. Al Shahania is a strong team, and we know

that the confrontation will not be easy,” AlaZein said.

He added that Al Sailiya are determined to make up for their opening-round defeat by producing a better performance and securing a positive result.

FIBA WORLD CUP ASIA QUALIFIERS

Qatar basketball squad arrive in Tokyo ahead of Japan game

Qatar national basketball team arrived in the Japanese capital Tokyo yesterday in preparation for their upcoming match against hosts on Monday. The match will be Qatar's second fixture of the current window of the second round of the FIBA Asia Qualifiers for the 2027 Basketball World Cup.

The delegation is headed by Saadoun Sabah al-Kuwari, Secretary General of the Qatar Basketball Federation and Director of National Teams. The squad has already begun preparations for the highly anticipated encounter, with head coach Hakan Demir focusing on correcting mistakes and enhancing both technical and physical readiness ahead of the Japanese test.

The Qatar-Japan clash will be held at Toyota Arena in Tokyo, where Qatar will be seeking a positive result to bounce

back from its opening setback, having lost to China 57-83 in Thursday at Al Janoub Arena in Doha. That match coincided with the official inauguration of the arena in its new basketball configuration, witnessed by a large crowd.

Japan enters the contest on the back of a strong start, defeating Saudi Arabia 106-78. Star player Rui Hachimura starred in that game, scoring 29 points, underlining Japan's offensive strength ahead of facing Qatar.

This match carries significant weight in Group F, which includes Qatar, Japan, China, Lebanon, Korea, and Saudi Arabia. Results from the first round of the window confirmed Japan's place among the frontrunners, while Qatar aims to improve its standing in the second round.

Qatar's roster for the current window features 12 players: Mostafa Foda, Mike Lewis, Mahmoud Darwish, Abdullah

Musa, Ndawi Elhaj Sidou, Abdullah Saad, Mohamed Hashem, Ousmane Dieng, Osama Arafah, Abdulrahman Yahya, Omar Saad, and Aladji Bobo Magassa.

Although Qatar is already guaranteed a place in the 2027 Basketball World Cup as the host nation, the qualifiers remain a vital part of the team's preparation. They provide the coaching staff with valuable opportunities to compete against Asia's strongest teams and assess the squad ahead of the global event in Doha.

After the match against Japan, Qatar face South Korea on November 26, Japan again on November 29 in Doha, China on February 26, 2027 and South Korea on March 1, 2027.

In parallel, the team is preparing for the basketball competition at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games, where Qatar are in Group B alongside Iran, Jordan, and Chinese Taipei.



The Qatar-Japan clash will be held at Toyota Arena in Tokyo on Monday.

FIELD HOCKEY

Dutch eye 4th successive World Cup title

Reuters
Amsterdam

Few sporting sides have been as dominant as the Netherlands' women's hockey team, who today bid for a fourth successive World Cup title and a record-extending 10th overall.

The Dutch women are also the reigning Olympic gold medallists, with four golds at the last five Games. They have won the last five European Championships and are fancied to continue their supremacy when they face Argentina in the final in Amsterdam today.

Top ranking and home advantage help, but there is an aura of near invincibility about the Dutch team, even if they edged into the final with a contentious win over Belgium, who had a potential late equaliser controversially chalked off after a

VAR check in Thursday's semi-final. Consistency has been a key element of Dutch dominance. Of the gold medal-winning squad from the Paris Olympics two years ago, only Laura Nunnink, late in recovery from injury, and retired Maria Verschoor are missing.

"The girls are used to nothing other than pressure to win gold," explained coach Raoul Ehren. "We are always the favourites. They have always lived up to that in recent years. No one runs away from that. This group is also that experienced. We have to embrace this and are not afraid of it."

Today's decider is a repeat of the last World Cup final in Spain four years ago, where the Dutch beat Argentina 3-1. The result forms part of their run of 25 unbeaten World Cup matches since Argentina won the trophy in Rosario in 2010.

Their last setback in a major tournament was a decade ago when Britain beat

them in the Olympic final in Rio de Janeiro, but since then they have swept all in their wake, putting up some sensational numbers. They have won 193 of 217 internationals since that Rio setback, with only seven defeats, the last of which was a 3-2 loss to hosts Argentina in December 2024 in the Women's Pro League in Santiago del Estero.

Several of the Dutch players have been crowned World Player of the Year, including Xan de Waard, who retires following the tournament after 14 years in the team, and 26-year-old goal ace Yibbi Jansen, who even has her own range of hockey sticks.

Women's hockey is exceedingly popular in the Netherlands, with a strong club system and participation. Strong support at the World Cup has also helped the Dutch cause, said captain Marijn Veen. "Playing a World Cup in your own country is probably as good as it can get."



Dutch players celebrate a goal during one of their matches at the FIH World Cup. The Netherlands take on Argentina in the women's World Cup final today. (www.fih.hockey)

CRICKET

Robinson, Archer shine as England take lead at Lord's

Pakistan crumble to 110 all out as England stretch lead to 261

AFP
London

Ollie Robinson took a sensational 4-11 in 13 overs as Pakistan collapsed to 110 all out in the second Test against England at Lord's yesterday.

But on a day when 13 wickets fell in total, England then slumped to 13-2 in their second innings on a pitch still offering significant seam movement.

England, however, had recovered to 81-3 - an overall lead of 261 runs - when bad light forced an early close to the second day. The hosts are seeking an unsailable 2-0 lead in a three-match series.

Robinson was well-supported by fast bowler Jofra Archer, who did the initial damage in a return of 3-26, and fellow paceman Josh Tongue, who took 2-27 after making a Test-best 30 not out at No. 11 earlier yesterday.

"I think our lead is a lot of runs on this wicket," Archer told *Sky Sports* after stumps. "There was a ball with your name on it today, so I am really happy with the guys and how we battled."

Opener Azan Awaits top-scored for the tourists with a determined 46, after he was dropped on eight in the slips by Harry Brook.

Saud Shakeel's 16 was the only other double-figure contribution by a Pakistan batsman.

"Probably the fastest spell (I've faced)," Awaits told the *BBC* after coming through Archer's probing stint with the new ball.

He added: "To have pace and accuracy is good."

An innings lasting a mere 37.2 overs ended with Pakistan nine wickets down after opener Imam-ul-Haq was unable to bat following a calf injury suffered when fielding on Thursday.

Gus Atkinson (45) and Tongue had earlier frustrated Pakistan



England's Ollie Robinson (second left) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of Pakistan's Mohammad Rizwan on day two of the second Test at Lord's cricket ground in London yesterday. (AFP)

with a tenth-wicket partnership of 47.

Archer made the breakthrough when a flat-footed Shan Masood, opening in place of Imam, edged a 91 mph (146 km/h) full-length delivery to wicket-keeper Jamie Smith for one.

Tongue then struck with what became the last ball before lunch when Abdullah Shafique was caught behind to leave Pakistan 16-2.

Pakistan captain Babar Azam got off the mark in style as he belted an 88 mph Tongue delivery through the covers for four before a flashing drive off Atkinson also sped to the boundary.

That was as good as it got for Azam, who missed Pakistan's crushing innings and 103-run defeat in the first Test at Headingley last week with a finger injury, before he nicked Tongue to a diving Jordan Cox at third slip.

Pakistan were 30-3, having been dismissed for 171 and 135 at Headingley.

Both Shakeel and Mohammad Rizwan were lbw to Robinson before Ali Usman played on to Archer. Pakistan then lost a flurry of wickets, Archer ending the innings in emphatic fashion when he knocked over Mohammad Abbas's off-stump.

Khurram Shahzad gave Pakistan a glimmer of hope with 2-5 in two overs after Ben Duckett (one) mistimed a half-volley to mid-off before Cox (11) was lbw on review.

ROOT LBW AGAIN

England captain Joe Root, not for the first time in his long career, came in with his side in trouble, at 13-2. Together with Emilio

Gay, he kept Pakistan at bay until, on 24, he was plumb lbw to a nip-back ball from Mohammad Ali - the ninth time in 12 Test innings the England great had been leg before.

Next ball Brook was also given out lbw to Ali, but the batsman's review revealed a huge inside edge.

In the morning, England resumed n 248-9 after fifties from Smith and Cox helped them recover from a top-order collapse caused by veteran seamer Abbas's superb burst of 3-4 in 16 balls after Pakistan won the toss.

BRIEF SCORES

England 290 (Abbas 4-73) and 81 for 3 (Gay 30*, Shahzad 2-26) **lead Pakistan 110** (Awaits 46, Robinson 4-11, Archer 3-26) **by 261 runs**

CYCLING

Leknessund solos to Vuelta stage-seven win, Pogacar extends lead



Team Uno-X's Norwegian rider Andreas Leknessund celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the seventh stage of the Vuelta a Espana 2026, a 149.8 km race between Vall d'Alba and Aramon Valdelinares yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Valdelinares, Spain

Norwegian Andreas Leknessund launched a successful solo attack on the final climb to the summit finish of Aramon Valdelinares to win stage seven of the Vuelta a Espana yesterday, ahead of teammate and compatriot Tobias Johannessen on a day when their country was mourning the death of King Harald.

Leknessund (Uno-X Mobility) made his move from a five-rider breakaway 7.5 km from the finish at the end of the 149.8-km ride from Vall d'Alba and pulled away to win his first Grand Tour stage on his Vuelta debut.

"It's been a special day for the team and also for the whole of Norway," Leknessund said.

"Obviously it's only a small thing in the bigger picture but still, it makes the day more special.

"I didn't expect it to be this emotional, but for sure there's so much feelings around this. I've been fighting really hard, and it means a lot."

Johannessen came in 34 seconds behind, having left Belgian Wout van Aert in his wake close to the finish, with the Visma-Lease a Bike rider having to settle for third after he had made the initial attack from the off and spent most of the day out in front with Leknessund.

Tadej Pogacar, winner of three stages already, was happy to sit back in the peloton before pulling away from his GC rivals approach-

ing the summit to gain more seconds. The Slovenian now leads Spaniard Enric Mas by three minutes and 50 seconds.

Van Aert and Leknessund got away early and were joined by another three riders, Johannessen, Eddie Dunbar and Alexey Lutsenko coming to the top of the first of five climbs.

The leaders worked together, building a substantial gap and at the foot of the final climb the five were one minute ahead of a chasing group of 13 riders with the peloton out of the running with less than 10 km to the finish.

Leknessund was the first to try to get away, and when nobody followed he was able to finally claim his stage win having finished runner-up three times at this year's Giro d'Italia.

"I said to Andreas that he should try to go early and then we check if the other guys are willing to work together," Johannessen said.

"That's what you always dream about when you try to be two guys in the breakaway and you can play it like this. I think we played it perfectly.

"A special day with what is happening back home in Norway so we are super proud."

Felix Gall, fifth overall, tried to get away from Pogacar, but the Slovenian responded and in the end gained 16 seconds on his closest rival Mas, with compatriot Primoz Roglic a further minute behind in third.

Today's stage eight is a flat 176.4-km ride from Pucol to Xeraco.

India captain Gill puts positive spin on drawn Colombo Test

COLOMBO: India captain Shubman Gill said there were lots of positives to take from their 1-0 series win in Sri Lanka but there can be little doubt the squad return home disappointed and disheartened after letting the hosts off the hook in the drawn second Test. India won the opening Test in Galle with ease and looked set to complete a whitewash after dominating the first four days in Colombo and making Sri Lanka follow on.

However, Gill's men failed to deliver the knockout blow and Sonal Dinusha's epic rear-guard action on Thursday rescued a thrilling draw.

For India, it was a missed opportunity to leapfrog Bangladesh into fourth place in the World Test Championship (WTC) standings and build a buffer ahead of their next two series against New Zealand and Australia. "I wouldn't say the draw stings like a defeat but ... the way they drew the match from where we were, credit to them," Gill told reporters after the Test ended. "It's disappointing obviously. We hoped for a



India's captain Shubman Gill (left) receives the trophy from Sri Lankan Cricket Transformation Committee Chairman Eran Wickramaratne at the end of the fifth day of the second Test against Sri Lanka in Colombo on Thursday. (AFP)

win but we also have to give credit to where credit is due." Currently fifth in the table, India need to win six of their remaining seven Tests to control their own destiny in the race for next year's WTC final. India travel to New Zea-

land in November for a two-Test series before hosting WTC leaders and former champions Australia in a blockbuster five-match contest early next year.

Still, India can take some encouragement from the performances of several younger players. Spinner Manav Suthar finished as the leading wicket-taker in his first Test series, while Devdutt Padikkal's twin hundreds suggested he could provide a long-term answer to India's search for a reliable number three. Dhruv Jurel added solidity to the middle order as well as an additional wicketkeeping option.

"A lot of positives from the series," Gill said when asked about his key takeaways from the series. "We've played good cricket on this series. In fact, of the 10 days of Test cricket, we dominated them on all days except on the final day. It's not easy winning overseas. They are also here to play and these are their home conditions. Sometimes we take things for granted, but I think it was overall a good series for us."

Ruben comes up trumps as Namibia beat South Africa in T20 opener

WINDHOEK: Fast bowler Ruben Trimpelmann took 3-24, including the key wicket of Deward Brevis, as hosts Namibia defeated a depleted South Africa by 18 runs in Windhoek yesterday in their opening Twenty20 clash in a Tri-Series also involving Zimbabwe. Namibia batted first and posted 163 for nine in their 20 overs, before restricting the visitors to 145 for nine in reply. The result makes it two wins from two for Namibia against their neighbours having won the first T20 clash between the sides last October, also in Windhoek. Namibia's innings was anchored by a superb 60 from 38 balls by Jan Frylinck, who put on an opening stand of 84 with Louren

Steenkamp (41 from 29 balls). At one stage 200 looked on for the home side, but they managed only 40 runs from the final 35 balls of the innings as South Africa bowled well at the death. Spinners Bjorn Fortuin (2-17) and Prenelan Subrayen (3-32) were the pick of South Africa's bowlers. South Africa struggled from the start of their reply and when Brevis fell for a well-played 75 from 50 balls, which included five sixes, their chances of winning the game diminished.

BRIEF SCORES

Namibia 163 for 9 (Frylinck 60, Steenkamp 41, Subrayen 3-32) **beat South Africa 145 for 9** (Brevis 75, Trimpelmann 3-24, Smit 3-31) **by 18 runs**

ASIAN GAMES CHIEFS SAY ROOM FOR EVERYONE AMID ACCOMMODATION CRUNCH



TOKYO: Asian Games organisers said yesterday that all participants at next month's event would have a place to stay after numbers ballooned to more than 17,000, raising fears of a bed shortage. About 15,000 athletes and officials were initially expected at the Games, which are being held in Nagoya and the wider Aichi area from September 19 to October 4. That was already more than the Olympics, but the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) last week put the number at 17,000 -- 11,000 athletes and 6,000 officials. There is no dedicated athletes' village, organisers instead relying on a cruise ship, temporary wooden containers and hotels. In March, the OCA added teqball and padel to the sporting pro-

gramme. Organising committee president Hideaki Omura said earlier this week that they had "neither the manpower nor the budget to make the necessary arrangements" for extra participants. "If they still wish to come, they will have to make their own arrangements," said Omura, who also serves as the governor of Aichi Prefecture. A joint statement from the organising committee and the OCA said accommodation had been found. "All the 17,000+ athletes and officials that are registered for the Asian Games before the closing of Entry by Name in July have been provided with Games-appropriate accommodation," the statement said. "Unless there are exceptional

circumstances, no further registrations have been or will be permitted." A statement issued only in the name of the organising committee also yesterday said that the number of participants "fluctuates daily" and had not yet been finalised. They also acknowledged that "it is now anticipated that the number of delegation members will exceed 15,000". Organisers have opted for temporary athlete accommodation to cut costs, hiring the Italian cruise ship Costa Serena for the event. Between 4,000 and 5,000 athletes will stay on the ship, while a further 2,000 athletes and officials will stay in the shipping container-style huts.

The rest will be in hotels, including in Tokyo, where swimming, diving and equestrian events will take place. The local organising committee said reports that they were looking to reduce the number of participants were not true. Instead, they said, "certain team officials would arrange their own accommodation". Officials are confident that the plan will not be disrupted by Japan's typhoon season, which is usually in full swing in September-October. "The final preparations are all on track and progressing smoothly ahead of what promises to be the most spectacular Asian Games held for generations," the organising committee and the OCA said in a joint statement.

TENNIS

Djokovic eyes 25th major at US Open in fresh bid

Sinner ruled out with knee injury, Alcaraz returns after layoff

Reuters
New York

The stars may be aligning for Novak Djokovic's quest to win a standalone record 25th Grand Slam at the US Open, with Jannik Sinner out injured and Carlos Alcaraz returning from a lengthy layoff, though Alexander Zverev remains a formidable obstacle.

Since triumphing at Flushing Meadows in 2023, Djokovic has remained a force at the Grand Slams, but Alcaraz and Sinner have seized control of the men's game and shared 10 of the last 11 major titles.

Attempts by the Serb to go clear of Margaret Court on the all-time list of major winners have repeatedly been thwarted by Alcaraz and Sinner, who have combined to beat him five times across the last six Grand Slams.

Djokovic's best opportunity in years ended in a defeat by Alcaraz in this year's Australian Open final, but the 39-year-old is not short of belief as he eyes a fifth US Open title despite limited preparation and lingering physical issues.

"There is a word in Serbian called inat," Djokovic said in his new documentary that aired before the year's final major.

"When people doubt you, when everyone is basically against you, that's when you use that inat, that force of stubbornness to prove everybody wrong. That inat is quite widespread in the mentality of Serbian people."

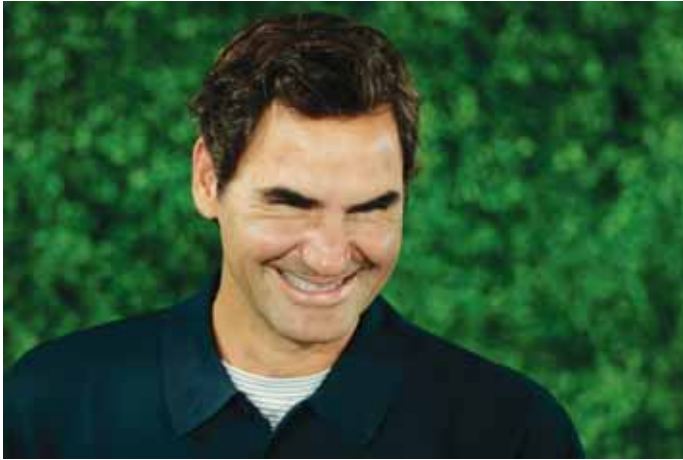
Circumstances have also broken more favourably for Djokovic than in recent years, with Sinner ruled out by a knee injury and Alcaraz back after more than four months out with a wrist issue that has left questions about his sharpness.

Alexander Zverev may represent Djokovic's biggest obstacle, however, after finally ending his long wait for a maiden major title at the French Open before making the Wimbledon final to underline his credentials as a top contender in New York.

Alcaraz's long absence has clouded his prospects, but the defending champion has built a reputation for producing his best tennis on the grandest stages and cannot be discounted despite the



Serbia's Novak Djokovic reacts after returning a shot against Argentina's Thiago Agustín Tirante during the Cincinnati Open last week. (Reuters)



Roger Federer during the induction ceremony at the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, Rhode Island, yesterday. (Reuters)

uncertainty surrounding his return.

Despite Zverev's breakthrough and credible challengers in the draw, Swiss great Roger Federer believes Djokovic cannot be written off.

"Whenever Novak enters any tournament, for that matter, or a major, he'll have a shot," Federer told reporters in New York.

"I've seen what he can do, not

just once, not just here or there. He's done it in every place at the highest of levels.

"As long as he's in the draw, there's a chance. That's also one of the reasons he's still playing, because he actually truly must believe he can still do it."

Canadian Open champion Ben Shelton and Cincinnati runner-up Frances Tiafoe spearhead a strong American challenge, while

2024 finalist Taylor Fritz will also fancy his chances of ending a 23-year wait for a homegrown men's champion. Andy Roddick, the 2003 US Open winner, believes Shelton has thrust himself into genuine contention after shrugging off a tame first-round exit at Wimbledon to win the Montreal title earlier this month.

Shelton remains difficult to gauge after an early exit in Cincinnati, with questions lingering over his ability to sustain his level over the course of a major.

"One thing to watch for is he has to take care of his business in the first week to be a contender in the second week," Roddick said on his 'Served' podcast.

"So far this year, that's been tough for Ben in majors... the upside is four titles on different surfaces, and rightfully so, we talk about and wonder if this is someone who can win a Grand Slam."

Beyond the established contenders, rising talents like Arthur Fils and Rafael Nadal will look to make a mark in New York, while last year's semi-finalist Felix Auger-Aliassime seeks to build on the joint best major run of his career.

MOTOGP

Bezzecchi edges past Marquez brothers in Spanish practice



Team Aprilia Racing's Marco Bezzecchi rides during the first free practice at the Motorland circuit in Alcaniz, northeastern Spain, on the eve of the Aragon Grand Prix, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Alcaniz, Spain

Marco Bezzecchi edged out brothers Alex and Marc Marquez in a knife-edged second practice session for the Spanish MotoGP at Alcaniz in Aragon yesterday.

The trio were separated by 0.038sec at the end, making it the closest ever top-three in a Friday session.

Reigning champion Marc Marquez was fastest in the morning and opened the afternoon by breaking his own lap record on his Ducati with a time of 1min 45.493.

In a furious finale, Bezzecchi of Aprilia broke that record with a time of 1:45.455 with Alex Marquez of Ducati-Gresini jumping to second 10 thousandths of a second behind. Bezzecchi started the season with three straight wins but sputtered after winning in round seven at Mugello and ceded the championship lead to team-mate Jorge Martin.

He said he is still "in pain" following crashes in the German race in July.

Motorland is a rare anti-clockwise circuit and has a lot of left turns.

"The left side of my body is struggling a bit," he said. "The shoulder is painful and the knee is more painful. I'm a bit worried because it's going to be a long weekend."

He added that he suspected that Marc Marquez, who has won seven times on the MotorLand circuit, was "hiding a bit" and would show more pace over the weekend.

Marquez said he was happy with his display.

"I'm under the record but not the fastest," said Marquez.

"So, that means everybody is super-fast, and everything is very close, and it will be a tough weekend."

Italian Fabio Di Giannantonio on a Ducati-VR46 was fourth, 0.299sec behind Bezzecchi. He was followed by four Spaniards: Fermin Aldeguer on a Ducati-Gresini, Raul Fernandez of Aprilia-Trackhouse, Martin and Pedro Acosta of KTM.

The top ten skip the opening qualifying session today and go straight to Q2 which decides the first four rows on the grid.

SWIMMING

McKeown wants to reclaim world records

AFP
Sydney

Five-time Olympic swimming champion Kaylee McKeown vowed yesterday to reclaim her 50m and 100m backstroke world records while also setting her sights on staying in the pool until the 2032 Brisbane Games.

The Australian reigning Olympic and world 100m and 200m backstroke champion has been sidelined with glandular fever and a broken wrist. She missed the Commonwealth Games and Pan Pacific Championships and could only

watch as Italian teenager Sara Curtis twice broke her three-year-old 50m record at the European Championships in Paris this month.

"I've had some of my records taken from me, I'd like to reclaim them," McKeown told broadcaster ABC after Curtis lowered the mark to 26.56 seconds. "I can hold onto my medals, but world records are meant to be broken."

While McKeown still holds the 200m backstroke world record, American Regan Smith broke her 100m mark in 2024. Widely considered the greatest backstroke of all time, the Australian admitted she had "a lot of work to do", but was up for the challenge.

PREVIEW

Question marks in women's field leave door open for Gauff and Swiatek in NY

Reuters
New York

Major question marks hang over the top two seeds in the women's field when the US Open main draw begins tomorrow, leaving the door open for past winners Coco Gauff and Iga Swiatek to bring home another trophy from Flushing Meadows.

Top seed Aryna Sabalenka's dismal back half of the season has clouded her pursuit of a rare third

successive US Open title, while number two Elena Rybakina's exit from Cincinnati with a leg injury has cast her campaign into doubt.

It has been a different story entirely for 2023 champion Gauff, who got her once-maligned serve working for her en route to the semis in Toronto and to her first title of the year with a confidence-inspiring performance in Cincinnati. She will benefit, too, from the rowdy New York crowd, as a perennial American fan favourite.

"Coco Gauff played exceptional tennis in Cincinnati. She played

well in Canada, as well. To me she's the one that's playing the best tennis," said ESPN commentator and former world number four Mary Joe Fernandez.

Fourth-ranked Gauff and third-ranked Jessica Pegula will be playing for national pride with US women failing to make the final at the first three majors this year.

Poland's six-times major winner Swiatek arrives in New York with fresh fight in her, shaking off bitter criticism back home to win her first title of the season in Toronto earlier this month. Swiatek has not

made it past the quarter-finals at any of the year's majors and had to fight her way back to top form in time for the North American hard court swing.

"The journey has been bumpy this season," the eighth-ranked Swiatek told reporters after she swatted aside Rybakina to lift the trophy in Canada.

"Sometimes I was impatient throughout the season. I was, like, seeking (a win) while maybe my game was not ready."

But while Swiatek's form is peaking at the best time, Sabalen-

ka's has dipped at the worst, as she has failed to reach a final since completing the Sunshine Double this year. If she wins, she would become only the third woman in the Open Era to "three-peat" at Flushing Meadows - and the first since Serena Williams claimed a trio of titles between 2012 and 2014 - as she closes in on 100 straight weeks atop the rankings.

Other contenders include Russian teen Mirra Andreeva, who claimed her maiden major title at Roland Garros this year, and Czech Linda Noskova, who carved out

her own slice of the spotlight with a breakthrough Wimbledon title last month. And the Philippines' Alexandra Eala made believers out of many when she beat four-time major winner Naomi Osaka and Pegula to win the WTA 500 title in DC this month.

Japan's Osaka, the US Open winner in 2018 and 2020, can expect the usual adoration from the New York crowd, particularly after she recaptured some of her old brilliance to reach the semis last year following a 2023 layoff on maternity leave.

SPOTLIGHT

Watkins' legacy at Villa untarnished, says Emery as Jackson arrives

AFP
London

Unai Emery said Ollie Watkins should be remembered fondly by Aston Villa fans despite not playing in last weekend's 4-0 thrashing by Brighton as he nears a move to Saudi side Al Hilal.

The England international is closing in on a £50mn (\$68mn) exit and will be replaced by Chelsea's Nicolas Jackson. Watkins will follow Ezri Konsa, Morgan Rogers, Youri Tielemans and Lucas Digne out of Villa Park as the side that won last season's Europa League has been torn apart.

But Emery said a disagreement over his availability last weekend should not mask Watkins's legacy after netting 108 times

over the last six years. A depleted Villa conceded four goals inside the opening 31 minutes at Brighton and also had Joao Gomes sent off in the first half in a miserable start to the season.

"Last week I was a little bit disappointed. I was disappointed, but we spoke about it, and now (it's) clear, he is a fantastic player, fantastic guy and one mistake is not closing all the good things he did here," Emery said ahead of Arsenal's visit to Villa Park on Monday.

"He was wrong, but we accepted it. The players as well because he always had very good behaviour and commitment with the club and with me. I told him 'bye' with a huge hug and with small tears. But now it's a new chapter here with Nicolas Jackson."

Jackson will reportedly cost Villa an initial £47.5mn with a further £17.5mn in

potential add-ons. Goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez is set to move in the other direction to join Chelsea and the Villa exodus.

Villa have been forced to cash in on many of their stars due to financial sustainability rules. But Emery is determined to continue driving the club forward after qualifying for the Champions League twice in the past three seasons and also ending Villa's 30-year wait to win a trophy.

"We don't want to be a club to sell players, but the responsibility is there," added the Spaniard. "It's not changing our objective, our priority for the next year is to be competitive and to fight again to be in the top positions." Emery is hopeful Jackson will be registered in time to face champions Arsenal, while Leon Goretzka could also make his debut after joining on a free transfer from Bayern Munich.



Aston Villa boss Unai Emery confirmed Ollie Watkins' departure and revealed the striker had apologised for making himself unavailable for the club's Premier League opener.

LA LIGA

Raphinha, Lopez strike as Barca beat Athletic

The Catalan giants eased to a solid victory over their Basque visitors at home

AFP
Barcelona

Raphinha and Fermin Lopez goals helped Spanish champions Barcelona beat Athletic Bilbao 2-0 on Thursday in La Liga to continue their perfect start to the season.

The Catalan giants eased to a solid victory over their Basque visitors in their first game of the season at the partially-rebuilt Camp Nou, with new arrival Rodri coming on for his Barca debut.

Raphinha rounded the goalkeeper and slid home in the 37th minute to give Barca the lead, and Lopez netted after 82 minutes to secure the points, with the Catalans missing several chances for more goals and twice hitting the woodwork.

"Very happy to play my first game, happy with the victory, we've got two from two," Rodri said. "It's important to keep building up rhythm and adapting to this great team. My first minutes and (I had some) good feelings."

Barca coach Hansi Flick made three changes to the team that thrashed Elche 5-0 last weekend, handing Anthony Gordon his first start for the club, while bringing Pedri Gonzalez into midfield and picking Pau Cubarsi in defence.

The German kept Raphinha playing up front as a makeshift number nine, after the departures of Robert Lewandowski and Ferran Torres.

Barca have fruitlessly tried to pry Julian Alvarez away from Atletico Madrid, who will not negotiate with the Spanish champions for the Argentina forward.

However, Raphinha netted twice from his striker's role against Elche and was on target again for Barca at Camp Nou, giving them a deserved lead at half-time.

"It doesn't matter which position Rapha plays, as a captain he's shown total commitment to this team, to this club," Flick told reporters. "You can see the supporters are connected with him and it's really good."

The Brazilian nodded against the post



Barcelona's Raphinha is poised to score his team's first goal during the La Liga match against Athletic in Barcelona. (AFP)

from Xavi Espart's cross midway through the first half and Lamine Yamal's follow-up effort was deflected wide, with Barca controlling the game.

Eventually, they took the lead when Pedri slipped Raphinha through on goal, with the Brazilian rounding Unai Simon and rolling home. Teenage star Yamal should have doubled Barca's lead before the interval but Simon made a fine save to deny him, while Gordon complained that he would have had an open goal if the Spain international had knocked the ball across to him.

Gordon arrowed a shot narrowly over early in the second half as Barcelona probed for a second goal. Yamal, still not at his best level since suffering a hamstring injury in April, hit the crossbar with an effort from the edge of the box. Simon saved twice from

Lopez, who netted a brace in the opener.

Flick sent on former Manchester City midfielder Rodri for his debut in midfield, leaving 10 Spaniards and Gordon on the pitch for Barca.

The champions were in the ascendancy but Athletic threatened on a rare venture forward, with Oihan Sancet drilling against the post.

Barcelona eventually found their second after a mistake from Athletic defender Aymeric Laporte, clumsily nudging Barca substitute Karim Adeyemi's cross past Simon, for Lopez to tuck into an empty net.

Adeyemi should have netted a third late on when Yamal picked him out at the back post but Simon denied the German from point-blank range. Yamal's second half performance was an improvement on a

disappointing opening 45 minutes and his struggles against Elche, and Rodri said that the forward is improving.

"Maybe Lamine came from a moment where he was a bit down and today we tried to help him get back up and saw his best version, even though he didn't score," added Rodri, Spain's World Cup winning captain. "The goals will come because the talent is there."

Athletic Bilbao have started their season with two defeats under new coach Edin Terzic. "I'm not a constant winner, I'm a constant trier," said former Borussia Dortmund coach Terzic. "I'm fully of belief and trust when I see how we worked in these two games and in the training ground, sooner or later we'll get what we deserve and turn results in our favour."

FOCUS

In Premier League's shadow, Serie A flexes financial muscle

AFP
Rome

For Italian football this has been a chastening year, yet, ahead of a likely frenzy before their transfer window shuts on September 1, Serie A clubs have spent the summer asserting their place in Europe's financial pecking order.

In both overall outlay and net spend, Serie A is a clear second among the 'Big Five' leagues. While fee structures, conditional payments and financial sleights-of-hand can make the precise transfer values a little hazy, German site *Transfermarkt* on Thursday put Italy's total outgoing at more than one billion euros (\$1.165bn), far ahead of La Liga, at three-quarters-of-a-billion, and then the Bundesliga.

In all, the 20 Serie A clubs are almost 430mn euros in the red this summer, against just under 300mn euros in Spain. Both the Bundesliga and French Ligue 1 are in profit.

Of course, the 'Big Five' is a misleading phrase. European club football has become the Premier League and everyone else. English clubs have, so far, spent 3.2bn euros, more than the other four league put together.

The second round of the Serie A season opened yesterday with AC Milan, for now restored to their role as Italy's biggest spenders, hosting smartly-dressed yoyo club Venezia.

When Milan spent a reported 74mn euros to acquire Goncalo Ramos from Paris Saint-Germain, he became the most expensive Serie A signing since Juventus bought Dusan Vlahovic from Fiorentina five years earlier. With Diego Moreira, coming from Strasbourg for 50mn euros, Milan have spent a total of

almost 160mn euros, a whisker more than Juventus, with plenty of moves to come.

Under new boss Ruben Amorim, Milan opened the season with a 2-1 win at Torino. On Thursday, Amorim did not rule out further recruits.

"We have to wait five more days until the transfer window closes," the Portuguese coach, who started last season in the Premier League with Manchester United, told his pre-match press conference. "If someone arrives, it will be because they can help us both now and in the future."

He made clear that the transfer market was not simply about spending to bring players in. "It's impossible to train during the week with 27 players. Nobody is going to be prepared, nobody is going to be satisfied, so there are some players that if they stay, they will not be part of the squad," he said, when asked about reports that the club was trying to unload Fikayo Tomori, Youssouf Fofana and Santiago Gimenez.

After a summer in which Italy missed the World Cup, sparking a debate on the lack of talent in the national team, Amorim said clubs need to develop from within.

"We need to take time and believe in our young players," he said.

"We are going to have some problems with young players in some games, but big surprises happen. "Everyone wants everything really fast and I'm a little bit old school. I think a lot of things will take time."

Yet on the opening weekend, five of the six biggest spenders, Milan, champions Inter Milan, Juventus, Roma and Napoli all won. The exception were Fiorentina, trying to spend their way into the top end of the table, who crashed to Roma.



In both overall outlay and net spend, Serie A is a clear second among the 'Big Five' leagues.

Bournemouth, Sunderland to face AC Milan in Europa League

Monaco: English duo Bournemouth and Sunderland were both handed a glamour tie against AC Milan among their eight matches in the Europa League as the draw for this season's league phase took place yesterday.

Bournemouth are featuring in a continental competition for the first time after finishing sixth in last season's Premier League, and can look forward to hosting seven-time European champions Milan on the south coast of England.

The team coached by Marco Rose will also play home games against Czech club Viktoria Plzen, Sturm Graz of Austria and Israeli champions Hapoel Be'er Sheva.

In addition, they will go to Spain twice to take on Real Sociedad and Celta Vigo, as well as visiting Sparta Prague and last year's Norwegian Cup winners Lillestrom.

Sunderland's seventh-placed finish in last season's Premier League gave them European football for the first time since 1973, and their supporters can look forward to a trip to San Siro.

They will also visit former UEFA Cup winners Anderlecht, have home games against Dutch side AZ Alkmaar, Dinamo Zagreb and Levski Sofia, and play two Polish clubs in the shape of Jagiellonia Bialystok and Lech Poznan.

In addition, they will visit Torrence, the tiny second-division side who were shock winners of last season's Portuguese Cup.

Torrence are from the town of Torres Vedras, 50 kilometres north of Lisbon, but are set to host European matches at the Estadio do Algarve, just outside Faro. Like their fellow English sides, last season's UEFA Conference League winners Crystal Palace were among the third pot of seeds.

Now coached by Frenchman Pierre Sage, the South London club will face Real Sociedad, Sparta Prague, Lech Poznan and German outfit Hoffenheim at home.

They will go to Lyon, Salzburg and Jagiellonia, and also head to Istanbul to take on Besiktas.

Celtic were forced to settle for a berth in the Europa League after a spectacular collapse in losing to LASK of Austria in the Champions League play-offs.

The Scottish champions will notably play host to Marseille and visit Benfica, with Celta Vigo, Besiktas and Torrence among their other opponents.

Other sides to look out for in this season's Europa League include Bayer Leverkusen and Juventus, the latter three-time winners of the tournament's predecessor, the UEFA Cup.

Fixture dates for the league phase will be announced by UEFA over the weekend, but the first matches will be played on September 16 and 17.

This season's final will be played in the German city of Frankfurt on May 26, 2027.

Aston Villa won last season's Europa League by beating Freiburg in the final in Istanbul. Brighton and Hove Albion will be the Premier League's representative in the Conference League, which has been won by an English side in three of the last four years.

Their most glamorous game in the league phase will be at home to Monaco, while they will also host Romanian champions Universitatea Craiova and last year's Lithuanian title winners Kauno Zalgiris.

In addition they will go to Panathinaikos and Getafe as well as Jablonec, the Czech side who defeated Rangers on penalties in the play-offs.