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FOOTBALL

It ‘hurts’ says Messi as he ends international career

Messi’s crowning glory came in Qatar, where he led Argentina to the World Cup title in 2022

AFP
Miami

Lionel Messi said he was retiring from international football after leading Argentina to a second successive World Cup final in July.

The 39-year-old forward who won the World Cup in 2022 and dragged his nation to the final in the United States only to lose to Spain, said the decision had been painful.

“It was a decision that hurt and still hurts deep in my soul but I understand that it is the right time,” Messi wrote on Instagram. “I swear I always gave everything, not just in the last few years when we won everything but before that too, and I always fought and gave my all for this shirt,” he added.

Messi led Argentina to World Cup glory four years ago by winning the final against France in a penalty shoot-out in Doha, but his side lost 1-0 to a superior Spain side in the 2026 final in East Rutherford, New Jersey. Following the death of his father Jorge in August, Messi had said he had “serious doubts” about continuing to play football of any sort for “much longer”.

“I don’t know what I’ll do without you, I don’t know how to go on. I just played football, and now I have serious doubts about continuing to do so for much longer,” he said then.

Messi’s contract with Major League Soccer club Inter Miami runs until the end of the 2028 season. In this year’s finals, Messi inspired Argentina to another final by scoring eight goals and provided two assists in the dramatic late comeback against



England in the semi-finals.

But the dream of lifting the trophy again proved one match too far as the South Americans lost to Spain in the MetLife Stadium in a match that ended in ugly scenes. Midfielder Leandro Paredes and several of his Argentina team-mates have received bans and fines for their part in clashes with Spain players after the final.

Messi, meanwhile, was pictured in tears after receiving his loser’s medal. He said afterwards that the pain of defeat was “immense” and that it would “take a long time for this wound to heal”.

In his statement, the eight-time Ballon d’Or winner said it was time for a new generation of Argentina players to take up the torch. “I love, I loved, and I will always love being on the national team,” he wrote. “I gave everything I had, I have nothing more to give, and besides, there are some very talented young players coming up behind me who deserve to be there.”

First called up in 2005 by Jose Nestor Pekerman as an 18-year-old, Messi would go on to play 207 times for Argentina and become the country’s leading scorer, with 125 goals. Messi also won two Copa Americas in 2021 and 2024 during his 21-year international career.

Yet, prior to the trophy-laden later years, Messi did not hold the place in Argentine hearts reserved for other national idols such as Diego Maradona or Pope Francis. After moving to Catalonia at 13 to join Barcelona, Messi could have represented Spain but chose Argentina.

His long-time team-mate Angel Di Maria, also a 2022 world champion, on Monday paid homage to Messi for this choice and his impact on the national team.

“We will be forever grateful to you for being Argentinian and for having taken Argentina to the top of the world,” Di Maria said. “For having chosen to be Argentinian when you could have chosen something else. Thank you for everything.”

Messi’s six defining moments with Argentina

Lionel Messi announced his retirement from international football, six weeks on from Argentina’s defeat in the World Cup final and after over 200 appearances for his country stretching across more than two decades. *AFP Sport* looks back at the moments that defined Messi’s career with his country.

Inauspicious start

Messi’s international career began as a fresh-faced 18-year-old in 2005. His first cap was unforgettable for the wrong reasons -- ninety seconds after coming on as a substitute in a friendly with Hungary in Budapest, he was sent off for what the referee saw as an elbow.

The following June he made his first World Cup appearance in the 6-0 win over Serbia and Montenegro with which Argentina began the 2006 tournament in Germany.

Messi got his team’s final goal in Gelsenkirchen -- the first game and goal of what would become a legendary relationship with the World Cup.

First World Cup final

Messi was 26 when Argentina headed to Brazil in 2014, but was already established as one of the greats thanks to his achievements with Barcelona.

There had been numerous disappointments with Argentina: quarter-final defeats, both to Germany, at the World Cup in 2006 and in 2010, the latter with Diego Maradona as coach. There was also a Copa America final loss to Brazil in 2007, and a miserable showing at the 2011 version of that competition on home soil.

Messi went to Brazil as captain of

Alejandro Sabella’s team, and made a flying start by scoring in every group game. The goals then dried up, but he took Argentina to their first World Cup final since the days of Maradona, only for the Albiceleste to fall short against Germany at the Maracana.

2016: His lowest ebb

The 2014 heartache was followed by the misery of losing the following year’s Copa America final on penalties to Chile. Messi therefore went to the 2016 Copa America Centenario in the United States on a mission to finally win a major international title. Argentina cruised to the final.

Chile stood before Argentina once again at the MetLife Stadium just outside New York, but the outcome was identical -- another defeat on penalties, with Messi this time missing his kick.

Messi, who had already won over 100 caps, was heartbroken. “For me the national team is over,” he declared. “I’ve done all I can, I’ve been in four finals and it hurts not to be a champion.”

Six weeks later Messi changed his mind and agreed to come out of his brief international retirement.

A winner at last

The second half of Messi’s international career could not have contrasted more starkly, with Lionel Scaloni’s appointment as coach in 2018 proving a game-changer.

In 2021, in the middle of the Covid pandemic, Messi and Argentina went to Brazil for the Copa America and beat the hosts 1-0 in the final thanks to an Angel Di Maria goal to claim

their first major title in 28 years.

The crowning glory in Qatar

Messi could, and perhaps should, have bowed out after the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, when the Barcelona legend -- by now 35 and playing for PSG -- found another level to drag Argentina to victory.

He scored seven goals and set up three more in seven games, including a brace in the epic final against France -- when he also converted his penalty in the shoot-out which gave Argentina the trophy for the third time in their history.

“Obviously I wanted to finish my career with this. I can’t ask for any more,” Messi said after that triumph. But he wanted to play on a little longer as a world champion, and in the end he kept going all the way to this year’s tournament.

Another final defeat

Messi skippered his country to another title at the 2024 Copa America before going into a record-equalling sixth World Cup this year in the USA.

He was about to turn 39, but doubts about his age were blown away as Messi scored eight goals in his team’s first five games and helped inspire them to another final.

Messi has played more World Cup matches than anyone else (34) and scored 21 goals overall.

He became only the second player to appear in three different World Cup finals, but he and Argentina were abject as they lost in extra time to Spain -- an anti-climactic ending to an international career spanning 207 matches and 125 goals.



This combination of pictures shows Lionel Messi’s mastery through six World Cups, from 2006 to 2026, as Argentina’s legendary forward bows out of international football. (AFP)

PREVIEW

Sadd face Gharafa, Shamal take on Rayyan for Qatar Cup final spots

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Defending champions Al Sadd, Al Gharafa, Al Shamal and Al Rayyan will battle for places in the Qatar Cup 2026 final as the competition’s semi-finals take centre stage today.

The tournament brings together the top four finishers from the 2025-26 Qatar league, guaranteeing two high-quality clashes. Sadd face Gharafa in the first semi-final, while Shamal take on Rayyan in the other, with all four sides eyeing a chance to lift the trophy.

Sadd enter the competition determined to defend their crown and build on their strong start to the new season, but face a familiar Al Gharafa side to whom they lost in the Amir Cup final last season.

Al Gharafa coach Pedro Martins expects a high-level encounter and believes his team has the experience and ambition to overcome the champions.

“It will be a great match because it is a

semi-final and the winner will reach the final. Our team is ready and all the players are in their best condition to face Al Sadd,” Martins said at the pre-match press conference. “Al Sadd are a good team. We won the last encounter in the Amir Cup final, but we must focus on the next match. Both teams have experience in these games and we are ready to fight for victory.”

Martins also praised the development of Gharafa’s young players, saying they have become important members of the squad while continuing to gain experience and maturity.

Al Sadd coach Razvan Lucescu said his side are treating the competition with the utmost importance, knowing that only two victories stand between them and another trophy. “This competition is important for us. After two matches there will be a champion, which gives the fans pride and confidence. We will face a good and distinguished team and we will be ready,” Lucescu said.

Al Sadd have made a positive start to the season, but Lucescu insisted there is no room for complacency. “Al Sadd al-



Al Sadd’s coach Razvan Lucescu (right) with forward Firmino at a press conference.

ways plays to win and claim titles, and the Al Gharafa match is no exception. We must remain focused and continue improving from one match to the next.”

Former Liverpool forward Firmino, who joined Al Sadd this season, said the players are eager to reach the final. “This is a very important semi-final and there is a title we are striving to achieve. We are excited and fully focused. Al Gharafa are a capable team and we know this will be

difficult, but we are ready,” the Brazilian said.

The second semi-final pits Al Shamal against Al Rayyan, with both teams determined to take another step towards silverware. Al Shamal coach David Prats is targeting a historic first Qatar Cup final appearance for his team. He acknowledged the quality of Al Rayyan but believes his players can rise to the occasion.

“Tomorrow’s match is important and

we will face a strong opponent. We hope to live up to expectations and qualify for the final for the first time. We will fight against Al Rayyan and give our best over the 90 minutes,” Prats said.

The Spaniard said cup football demands a different mentality from league matches and urged his players to maintain the passion that helped them finish second last season.

Al Rayyan coach Vicente Moreno also expects a demanding encounter but has backed his players to deliver. “We know it will be a very difficult match. Cup games are naturally different from the league, but we are ready and confident that we can play an excellent match against Al Shamal,” Moreno said.

Moreno praised Al Shamal’s campaign last season but insisted Al Rayyan must focus on their own strengths as they pursue more silverware after winning two titles last season.

“They are a good team and performed brilliantly last season. We believe in ourselves and if we play our style, luck will be on our side. We play for our fans and we want to win more titles,” he said.

COMMENT

New balls behind batsmen’s struggles in England: Root

AFP
London

Joe Root believes a new batch of Dukes balls are the reason why there have been few big scores in Test cricket in England this season. Neither England nor Pakistan have managed an individual century in the first two Tests of an ongoing three-match series, where the hosts have established an unbeatable 2-0 lead. Pakistan have yet to pass 200 as a team in four innings so far. There have only been two totals above 400 all summer - the first by New Zealand in their series-deciding win over England at Trent Bridge and the second by England in their innings and 103-run thrashing of Pakistan in the first Test at Headingley. Bowlers have largely dominated with recalled England seamer Ollie Robinson taking 23 wickets in three Tests at a staggeringly low average of 8.34 following eight

more scalps in a series-clinching 194-run win over Pakistan at Lord's. "I think the balls have been very different this year," said England captain Root after watching his pacemen overpower Pakistan on Sunday to wrap up a convincing victory at Lord's. "I think there's a different lacquer to them. I've not got evidence on that, I probably need to ask Dukes, but I think there's a lacquer on the seam. They don't want them to go out of shape and get them changed." Root, England's all-time leading run-scorer in Test cricket, managed just 28 runs in two innings at Lord's and has now been lbw nine times in his past seven matches. He believes the balls are also helping make pitches more bowler-friendly. "They seem a lot firmer and probably if they're dinting the wickets then it's going to seam off the dints, it's going to make it move more." He added: "Sometimes you do come across summers where you

know it is the perfect storm. You get overcast conditions, you get a bit of rain to contend with, the balls are slightly different and it's hard. But that's part of the challenge of Test cricket." Root also urged his side to celebrate in a "grown-up way" success in the second Test at Lord's. Root returned for a second spell as Test captain following Ben Stokes's shock international retirement and back-to-back thrashings of Pakistan mean that England have now won a multi-match series for the first time since December 2024. But the build-up to the second Test was overshadowed by an incident which saw England quick Brydon Carse dropped from the squad after being handcuffed by police outside a Derby nightclub. "It's important we're not talking about that, absolutely," said Root. "It's hard to win Test matches, hard to win Test series, so enjoy it and celebrate it, but in a sensible, grown-up way."



England's Joe Root cleans the ball as Dan Lawrence prepares to bowl on day four of the second Test against Pakistan at Lord's cricket ground in London on Saturday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Pakistan sack coach Sarfaraz and send seven players home

White-ball coach Hesson steps in, Noffke taking over from bowling coach Gul

AFP
London

Pakistan have replaced head coach Sarfaraz Ahmed and pace-bowling chief Umar Gul, and sent seven players home, in a dramatic response to successive Test thrashings by England. The tourists suffered an innings and 103-run loss in the series opener at Headingley before going down by 194 runs at Lord's on Sunday as England took an unbeatable 2-0 lead in the three-match campaign. The team has been labelled one of Pakistan's worst and the Pakistan Cricket Board has taken drastic action ahead of the third Test at Edgbaston starting on September 9. "The Pakistan Cricket Board has today announced that seven players have been released from the Test squad following completion of the Lord's Test," said a PCB statement yesterday. "The players include Mohammad Rizwan, Imam-ul-Haq, Salman Ali Agha, Ali Usman, Aamir Jamal, Muhammad Awaiz Zafar and Khurram Shahzad. "Additionally, Sarfaraz Ahmed and Umar Gul have also been released and will be replaced by Mike Hesson and Ashley Noffke in the backroom staff." New Zealander Hesson was already Pakistan's white-ball chief, and, with Australian Noffke, will take charge for the rest of the tour. Opener Imam-ul-Haq suffered a low-grade calf tear at Lord's, but



Pakistan suffered an innings and 103-run loss in the series opener at Headingley before going down by 194 runs at Lord's on Sunday as England took an unbeatable 2-0 lead in the three-match campaign. (AFP)

received criticism for not batting in either innings. Experienced wicket-keeper Rizwan, spinner Usman and seamer Shahzad played in both games. Salman captained the team in the defeat at Headingley before regular skipper Babar Azam returned from injury at Lord's. Usman bagged a five-wicket haul in Leeds. Jamal and Zafar have not featured in the Test series.

Five uncapped players
Among the seven players called

up, five are uncapped. Batters Saim Ayub and Abdullah Fazal have played Test cricket, but fast bowlers Razaullah Khan and Mohammad Imran, left-arm spinner Arafat Minhas and wicket-keepers Said Baig and Rohail Nazir are looking to make their debuts. Pakistan arrived in London already bottom of the World Test Championship table, with defeat at Lord's their 15th loss in 20 Tests and tenth away from home in 11 games.

They have yet to make the benchmark total of 200 in four innings in England, although they did come close on Sunday, with 194 featuring Saud Shakeel's 97. Mohammad Abbas, who took nine wickets across the second Test, said Sunday: "Our performance is a concern for everyone. Everyone is worried. "We're not doing well, we accept that. We're not batting, bowling or fielding well and we discuss this all the time in meetings."

SPOTLIGHT

ACC says five-star room shortage hits Asian Games cricket

AFP
Colombo

The Asian Cricket Council has heard concerns over a lack of five-star hotel accommodation for players at the upcoming Asian Games in Japan, a Sri Lankan official said yesterday. The men's and women's T20 cricket will be played at Japan's newly built cricket ground in Nisshin starting September 17. But reports of tents serving as dressing rooms for players, distant washroom facilities and lack of top-class accommodation for cricketers have raised eyebrows. "There are some concerns with regard to the quality of accommodation being provided and also with regard to the logistics," Sri Lanka Cricket secretary Prakash Schaffter told reporters in Colombo. He said the ACC executive committee had discussed the Asian Games with "some degree of detail" at its recently concluded meeting in Bangkok. Member states had agreed to send representatives to examine the grounds and other logistical arrangements, but hoped

the tournament would still go ahead, he said. "There is a lack of available five-star rooms. Cricketers are generally provided with five-star accommodation," he said, adding that the host city did not have luxury hotels to accommodate all athletes and spectators. However, he said the ground prepared for the T20 series was suitable for play. Media reports in India said the country's cricket board was unhappy with the Asian Games' arrangements for the tournament and looking to send a second-string team. India have named a 15-member squad led by Shreyas Iyer and including teenage sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi for the Asiad. The Bangladesh Cricket Board said the member boards of the ACC are looking at the concerns regarding player facilities at the Asian Games. "The cricket part of the Asian Games will be looked after by the Asian Cricket Council," BCB cricket operations manager Shahriar Nafees said. "The individual boards have already discussed it at the ACC forum, and they will take a collective decision on the issue."



Sri Lanka Cricket Transformation Committee Chairman Eran Wickramaratne (left) speaks with Secretary Prakash Schaffter during a press conference at the Sri Lanka Cricket Board office in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

Bangladesh, India sincere over delayed series: Tamim

Bangladesh and India are "sincere" in their search for a new date for a white-ball series that was first supposed to take place last year, Bangladesh cricket chief **Tamim Iqbal** said.

The three one-day internationals and three T20 matches in Bangladesh were originally planned for August 2025 but then political relations soured between the two countries. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) then said the series would be played this September, but there is no sign of it happening imminently. "Both boards are very sincere that this thing happens," Tamim, president of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), said on the podcast Not out Noman on Sunday. "Both BCCI and BCB, we are looking at windows as well,

which time what can be done." He added: "Intentions are very positive." There was no immediate response from the BCCI. In February, Bangladesh refused to send a team to India for the T20 World Cup, citing security concerns. India last toured Bangladesh for a cricket series in 2022. Bangladesh visited India in September-October 2024.

TRI-SERIES Narrow win for Zimbabwe after Evans’ final over heroics

Reuters
Windhoek

Zimbabwe took four wickets in the final over to secure a narrow five-run victory over hosts Namibia yesterday in the third match of the Twenty20 tri-series also involving South Africa. Brad Evans finished with 3-41 as Namibia fell short of the target, chasing Zimbabwe's 195-6 but being bowled out for 190 with the last ball of a high-scoring contest at the Namibia Cricket Ground. Zimbabwe were put in to bat and started brightly with openers Ben Curran (38) and Brian Bennett (32) both getting among the runs, but they lost five wickets for 15 runs in a four-over spell in the middle of their innings. An unbeaten 94-run partnership

in 48 balls between Ryan Burl (57 not out) and Evans (37 not out) then saw Zimbabwe climb to an imposing 195-6 off their 20 overs. They looked to be well in command as Namibia slumped to 68-5 in the 11th over, but the hosts fought back with Zane Green and Alexander Busing-Volschenk smashing runs in 51 balls. Namibia needed 16 runs in the last over, but first Green was run out by a direct throw from deep for 54 and two balls later Busing-Volschenk (57) was caught behind off Evans with a flying catch from wicket-keeper Tadiwanashe Marumani, ending home hopes. Zimbabwe are back in action on Tuesday against South Africa. All three countries have one win under their belts after two games each and play each other twice with the top two finishers contesting a final at the weekend.

Pacer Rabada ruled out of Australia ODIs, under injury cloud for Tests

Pace spearhead **Kagiso Rabada** has been ruled out of the ODI series against Australia and is a doubt for the following Test series against Pat Cummins's team as he battles a hamstring injury. Cricket South Africa (CSA) said Rabada had suffered a right hamstring strain and would miss the three ODIs starting September 24 in Durban. "His availability for the three-match test series against Australia will depend on how he progresses through his rehabilitation, with a decision on his selection to be made closer to the series," CSA said in a statement. Rabada's domestic bowling coach Allan Donald told South African media Rabada's hamstring injury could see him sidelined for up to 10 weeks. The first test starts on October 9 in Durban, with Gqeberha and Cape Town also hosting matches. Losing Rabada for the Test series would be a huge blow for South Africa, who beat Australia in the World Test Championship final at Lord's last year when the 31-year-old took nine wickets. Rabada has an average of 21.39 in 11 tests against Australia, slightly better than his exceptional career average of 22.03.



US OPEN

Alcaraz wins in straight sets on injury return

SABALENKA BEGINS TITLE DEFENCE WITH WIN OVER OSORIO

Reuters
New York

Defending champion Carlos Alcaraz needed only a New York minute to hit his stride after a nearly five-month injury layoff, beating Russian Roman Safiullin 6-4 6-4 6-4 yesterday in the first round of the US Open.

Alcaraz arrived at Flushing Meadows as one of the tournament's biggest question marks, having not played since April due to a wrist injury, but he had his best weapon working for him in his first singles match in 139 days as he sent over 20 forehand winners.

He next plays Portugal's Jaime Faria in the second round.

"It's been a really tough five months for me," said Alcaraz.

"I missed it - I missed the crowd, the energy, I missed competition, I missed everything."

Alcaraz got a brief U.S. Open warm-up in the mixed doubles with partner Serena Williams last week, and the crowd at Arthur Ashe Stadium was all too happy to see him return, heaping deafening cheers on the twice champion as he took to the court.

Alcaraz whacked a forehand winner out of Safiullin's reach for the break in the seventh game and looked to be back to his usual self as the Russian was unable to tame Alcaraz's lethal serve on set point.

The Spaniard went down an early break in the second set but Safiullin gave up the momentum immediately as he sent a volley out on break point in the third game, never getting a handle on the match.

Alcaraz painted the line to go up another break in the seventh and was in total control in the third set, where he converted a break point with his powerful forehand.

"There were some doubts during the match, I'm not going to lie," said Alcaraz.

"I tried to forget everything. I tried to enjoy."



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain reacts after winning a point against Roman Safiullin during the first round of the US Open in New York. (AFP)

Earlier, Aryna Sabalenka's bid for a rare US Open three-peat got off to a winning start as she dispatched Camila Osorio, while French rising star Arthur Fils suffered a surprise loss.

World number one Sabalenka shook off her recent lackluster form to beat Colombia's Osorio 6-2, 6-4, in the Belarusian's opening match at New York.

"I feel like this is one of my favorite stadiums," Sabalenka said at the giant Arthur Ashe venue in Flushing Meadows, where she has won two of her four Grand Slams.

Sabalenka has not won a tournament since her victory in the Miami Open in March, and was bundled out of Wimbledon in the fourth round by Naomi Osaka.

But she looked comfortable for most of her opener, landing several of her thunderous groundstrokes to see off her counter-punching opponent. This year's Wimbledon finalist Karolina Muchova beat Sinja Kraus 6-3, 6-0, and Qinwen Zheng came back from a set down to defeat Kristina Liutova 4-6, 6-3, 6-1.

On the men's side, recent Cincinnati Masters champion Fils suffered disappointment, losing his opening match to Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Fils, 22, entered the contest with the highest expectations of his career, having this month become the first French player to win a Masters 1000 in over a decade.

The Frenchman had won all five of his previous encounters with Tsitsipas. But Fils, ranked 11th, fell to Tsitsipas 4-6, 7-6 (7/3), 6-1, 6-4.

"I am speechless, I don't know what to say," said Tsitsipas, a former top five player who has slumped to 53 in the world.

"It's an amazing start to the tournament."

Tsitsipas said ending a coaching relationship with his father Apostolos had brought much-needed calm to his tennis life.

Tsitsipas reached two Grand Slam finals and a career-high ranking of world number three under the guidance of his father, whom he parted ways with in 2024 after a 23-year spell together before renewing the arrangement last year.

But after injury problems and a string of disappointing results, Tsitsipas split with his father again before Wimbledon this year and brought in Thomas Perrin to his team as he sought to revive his fortunes.

"I personally felt like I needed it. I needed a different voice. I needed someone who provides a little bit more calm into my tennis world," Tsitsipas said after the match.

"There was a lot of chaos surrounding me before and a lot of noise. It took, for me, a long time to figure it out and realise that I just can't cope with it anymore. I also felt I grew up."

Tsitsipas said he had no regrets about making the change.

"I realised that having people who sometimes bring the worst out of you instead of the best ... these are some of the things that need fixing," he added.

Top-seeded German Alexander Zverev will play his first match against Italy's Lorenzo Sonego today.

TENNIS

Djokovic's Grand Slam future uncertain after brutal US Open defeat

AFP
New York

A record-setting 25th Grand Slam title looks even further from Novak Djokovic's grasp after the Serb great's brutal first-round exit from the US Open.

The 39-year-old was reduced to tears by an Arthur Ashe Stadium crowd trying to will him to victory on Sunday night, but his physical distress left him powerless against determined Argentinian Mariano Navone, who triumphed 7-6 (7/5), 5-7, 4-6, 6-2, 6-1.

Djokovic, knocked out in the first round of a major for the first time in 20 years, said the vomiting, cramping and back pain that hindered him throughout were symptoms that had plagued him for much of the year - and so far he's found no solution.

"I'm trying, man, I'm trying," he said in comments made available to media. "I'm just trying to address really what's going on and how far I can go this way."

It is three years since Djokovic secured his 24th Grand Slam triumph at the 2023 US Open.

Since then he's had 12 chances to break the record he shares with Australian Margaret Court, reaching two finals and half a dozen other semi-finals.

He'd been tantalizingly close this year, beating Jannik Sinner on the way to the Australian Open final, where he lost to Carlos Alcaraz.

He reached the semi-finals at Wimbledon, but Djokovic said he's battled his body throughout

2026. "It's something that I've been carrying, unfortunately, pretty much every match this year," he said. "You know, vomiting, throwing up, a serious issue there."

"Then my whole body, you know, starts to collapse, basically cramping and pain. Yeah, the back just gave up in the end and shoulder, and I couldn't close it out, you know?"

Djokovic said at Wimbledon he wanted to play the grass court classic "at least one more time."

He turned back the clock there with an epic win over third seed Felix Auger-Aliassime in the longest Wimbledon quarter-final ever before falling to Sinner in straight sets. But Djokovic has shown little of his vintage brilliance in his abbreviated US hardcourt season.

He was sick and slow in an opening loss in Cincinnati, saying the early exit had given him more time to "get my body and mind into the right state" for Flushing Meadows.

In his diminished physical state he still managed to rally from a set down to seize a two sets to one lead against 49th-ranked Navone before it all became too much.

Navone, 25, was aware of the magnitude of the moment.

"I don't know what can I say more because Novak is the GOAT in this sport. I beat him in US Open, Arthur Ashe, night session."

"I got up many times so early to see Novak in Australia, to see Novak in French Open, to see Novak in US open and going late before school ... it means a lot."



Serbia's Novak Djokovic reacts during his US Open first round loss to Argentina's Mariano Navone in New York. (AFP)

World No. 1 Korda not among WTGL's season 1 rosters

The inaugural WTGL season will tee off without the world's top-ranked women's golfer. Nelly Korda was not among the 25 players named to the five team rosters unveiled yesterday for the tech-infused indoor golf competition. In fact, only four of the top 10 players in the Rolex Rankings will be participating when action begins in November at the SoFi Center in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. The names of the five teams are the same as the men's TGL, which debuted in 2025 and was co-founded by Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy. The 28-year-old Korda, who collected her third and fourth major titles in 2026, told Golfweek this winter she wasn't sure she had time to commit to WTGL. "I just haven't really thought about it too much, because I've been really focused on trying to get ready for this (LPGA) season," Korda said in January. "I think, logistically, they're still trying to figure some stuff out, so I will just weigh out my options in the near future." Korda also told Golfweek that she was disappointed that women weren't included in the men's version.

GOLF

Top-ranked Scheffler storms to PGA Tour Championship win

AFP
Miami

World number one Scottie Scheffler produced a final day charge on Sunday to overhaul Viktor Hovland and win the PGA Tour Championship for the second time.

Four-time major champion Scheffler, who also won the season-ending Tour Championship in 2024, carded a four-under-par 66 to finish on 16 under and seal a three-shot victory at East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta.

Scheffler started the day three off the pace following Saturday's third round but chipped away at Hovland's advantage before pulling clear down the stretch to clinch the 22nd title of his PGA Tour career, and the \$10 million winner's check.

"Today was a day in which I was fortunate to get off to a good start and then was able to make some birdies to kind of seal the deal," Scheffler said afterwards.

"Just continuing to battle, day in and day out is something that

I'm very proud of... coming from behind and being able to win tournaments is a really cool feeling."

Hovland, who had been chasing his second Tour Championship win after lifting the 2023 title, saw his hopes evaporate with a closing two-over-par 72. He finished on 13 under.

Earlier, Scheffler had launched his bid for the title with a brilliant birdie on the par-three second, his tee-shot finishing just an inch from the cup for a simple tap-in.

Another birdie followed on the fourth when he rolled in a 23-foot putt for birdie. There was a hiccup on the seventh with a bogey, but he pulled that shot back with his third birdie of the day on the eighth. Birdies on the 10th and 13th left him at four under before a bogey checked his momentum on 15. But he dealt the decisive blow on the 16th, when a sensational second shot from the bunker left him with an 11-foot birdie putt which he duly rolled in for a two-shot advantage.

Hovland had a golden chance to pull a shot back on the 15th, but his putt lipped out to leave Scheffler in control.

The Norwegian missed another birdie opportunity on the 16th, but his putt curled agonizingly wide of the hole to leave him trailing by two shots with two to play.

The writing was on the wall on for Hovland after his third bogey of the day left him trailing by three shots to leave Scheffler untouchable. It was a frustrating final day for Hovland, who had rattled in putt after putt in Saturday's third round on his way to a five-under-par 65.

His sure touch on the greens deserted him on Sunday, though, with only one birdie made. Ryan Gerard finished in third place on 12 under after a closing 72.

Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy, who had thrust himself into contention with a dazzling seven-under-par 63 on Saturday, found the going harder with a closing one-under-par 69. McIlroy finished in a cluster of seven players on 11 under, five off Scheffler's winning total. England's Tommy Fleetwood, the 2025 champion, was one shot back from McIlroy, tied for 11th on 10 under alongside Australia's Adam Scott and Cameron Young of the United States.



Scottie Scheffler of the United States poses with the trophy after winning the PGA Tour Championship at East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta, Georgia. (AFP)

Qatar crowned Asian U-19 handball champions

Qatar clinched the Asian Under-19 Handball Championship title after defeating Bahrain 28-24 in the final in Amman, Jordan yesterday. Qatar took a 16-10 lead into half-time before maintaining their control in the second half to seal the title. Qatar remained unbeaten throughout the tournament, finishing top of Group B after victories over Saudi Arabia (30-22), Kuwait (30-19), Iran (24-22) and Syria (42-29). They then thrashed hosts Jordan 33-13 in the quarter-finals before overcoming South Korea 32-28 in the last four. The continental triumph also secured Qatar's qualification for the 2027 IHF Men's Junior World Championship in North Macedonia, marking the seventh time the team has reached the global tournament.



PREMIER LEAGUE

Saka strikes as flawless Arsenal punish Aston Villa

Arteta's side have taken maximum points from two opening games



Arsenal's Bukayo Saka scores past Aston Villa's goalkeeper Zion Suzuki at Villa Park in Birmingham. (Reuters)

AFP
Birmingham, United Kingdom

Arsenal extended their flawless start to the Premier League season as Bukayo Saka sealed the champions' 1-0 win against troubled Aston Villa.

Saka's second-half strike at Villa Park wrapped up Arsenal's second successive victory. In a statement of intent to their title rivals, Mikel Arteta's side have taken maximum points from their opening two games without conceding a goal.

It was the ideal way for Arteta to mark his 250th league game in charge of the Gunners. Arteta had picked the same starting line-up that cruised to a 3-0 win against Coventry in their season opener 10 days earlier.

Saka was on the scoresheet in that victory and once again the England winger delivered a valuable contribution. Underlining the quality at Arteta's disposal, England centre-back Ezri Konsa came off the bench in the closing stages for his Arsenal debut against his former club after leaving Villa in a £51mn (\$69mn) move on August 21.

Arsenal will face the first serious test of their ability to retain the title on Sunday when they host London rivals Chelsea, who have

also won their first two matches. By then, Arsenal could be bolstered by another new arrival as they continue to track unsettled Atletico Madrid striker Julian Alvarez ahead of today's transfer deadline.

The only concern for Arteta was a potential injury that forced Declan Rice to limp off in the closing stages. For Villa, the feeling of frustration is growing after a second consecutive defeat. Unai Emery's team slumped to a 4-0 loss at Brighton in their opener in the midst of the club's astonishing summer sale.

Motivated in part by the need to keep in line with Premier League financial rules, Villa have ripped apart their Europa League-winning squad, selling Konsa, Morgan Rogers, Ollie Watkins, Emiliano Martinez, Lucas Digne and Youri Tielemans.

Villa look a shadow of the vibrant team that ended their 30-year trophy drought last term, leaving Emery with a daunting job on his hands. In keeping with the sense of a club under renovation, one end of Villa Park was closed to fans on Monday due to building work to increase the capacity.

Nicolas Jackson made his Villa debut after arriving from Chelsea as Watkins's replacement in attack, while Japan goalkeeper Zion Suzuki, a recent signing from Parma, was given his maiden appearance. Villa winger Emil-

iano Buendia lashed a fierce strike against the crossbar in a rocky start for Arsenal.

The Gunners eventually recovered their composure and Villa defender Pau Torres was forced to make a superb block to stop Christos Tzolis tapping in Saka's cross. Arsenal appealed in vain for a penalty when Riccardo Calafiori tumbled under contact from Torres late in the first half.

After his side showed a distinct lack of cutting edge in the opening period, Arteta replaced Tzolis with Eberechi Eze at the interval.

The change made an impact and Victor Lindelof needed to make a last-ditch intervention to stop Kai Havertz converting Rice's pass.

Martin Odegaard curled a free-kick inches wide after VAR overturned the initial decision to award a penalty for Ian Maatsen's barge on Saka because the foul took place just outside the area. It was only a temporary reprieve for Villa as Saka broke the deadlock at the climax of a perfectly constructed raid in the 59th minute. Eze's pass picked out Calafiori's run into the Villa area and the defender's low cross was poked in by Saka from close range.

Havertz's blast was saved by Suzuki before Konsa made his debut to a mix of boos and applause from conflicted Villa fans. With Konsa helping to shutdown Villa's forwards, Arsenal were able to wrap up a gritty success.

SPOTLIGHT

Liverpool sign Barcola from PSG for £124mn

AFP
London

France winger **Bradley Barcola** has become Liverpool's second-most expensive signing after joining the Premier League giants from Paris Saint-Germain.

A source close to PSG said that Barcola's transfer is worth "£125mn euros (£107mn, \$145mn) plus 20mn euros in easily achievable bonuses".

The total fee of £124mn is second only to the £125mn Liverpool paid Newcastle for Sweden star Alexander Isak. Barcola's fee is the highest ever paid for a Ligue 1 player. It is also the 10th £100mn-plus transfer in Premier League history and the fourth such deal completed this summer.

The 23-year-old is the third forward costing over £100mn that Liverpool have signed in two years. Isak arrived at Anfield last year and Liverpool also paid around £100mn to sign Florian Wirtz from Bayer Leverkusen.

Neither player has yet lived up to the hefty price tag, although Isak missed much of last season due to injury.

Barcola, who signed what Liverpool said was a "long-term deal", had yet to play for PSG this season amid the transfer speculation. "It's a great pride to be able to play for Liverpool. I'm very happy," he told his new club's website.

"It took a long time but I'm really happy today to be able to play for Liverpool and all I want is to be on the pitch and be able to play. I hope to achieve very big things. First of all, winning the Premier League - it's one of my biggest dreams in my life. It is to do that and to stay in this team in the long term - that's why I signed a long contract - and I hope I can do it."

Barcola, a member of the PSG squad which won back-to-back Champions League titles in the past two seasons, has long been a Liverpool target.

He scored 39 goals in 152 appearances and won three successive Ligue 1 titles during his time in the French capital after joining PSG from domestic rivals Lyon in a £38.6 million deal in 2023.

Barcola also scored three goals for France during their run to the semi-finals at the recent World Cup.

Liverpool have been looking to strengthen in wide areas since



the departure of Mohamed Salah at the end of last season. Luis Diaz's departure the season before left Liverpool's forwards without service from the wings.

They have already signed Spain World Cup-winning winger Victor Munoz from Osasuna in the current transfer window and he has made a bright start, scoring the equaliser in Liverpool's 2-2 draw against Nottingham Forest on Saturday, which followed the same scoreline in their Premier League opener at Newcastle on August 23.

Barcola is expected to play on the left wing, with Cody Gakpo pushed down the pecking order and linked with a move to Manchester City.

Barcola's arrival at Anfield sees him reunited with former PSG team-mate and current fellow France international Hugo Ekitike, who is recovering from a ruptured Achilles tendon.

"I don't know Jeremy (Jacquet), but I was able to talk to Hugo, who I met in the French team and in my old club," said Barcola. "He was waiting for me to sign the contract, sending me messages often asking me if I was coming or not. I can't wait to get back together and be able to play with him. I already said (told him) that it is done."

Barcola was not always first-choice at PSG, with Ousmane Dembele, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and Desire Doue providing stiff competition for places, but he still played a key part in their Champions League triumphs.

Spurs' Richarlison braces for Everton switch after transfer 'turmoil'

London: Tottenham striker Richarlison is braced to rejoin Everton despite warning that "never again will anyone decide my future".

Everton are in talks with Tottenham over a potential deal to bring the Brazil international back to Merseyside.

Tottenham boss Roberto De Zerbi claimed on Saturday that Richarlison had been left out of the squad for the 2-0 loss against Newcastle because "too many times he asked to leave".

But Richarlison took to Instagram to portray an entirely different version of events ahead of Tuesday's transfer deadline.

In a remarkable outburst, Richarlison said: "After everything I've been through in the last few years, I've decided that never again will anyone decide my future for me.

"I went through a lot of bad things, and almost all of them happened because decisions were made by other people. Pressure, threats, retaliation - none of that scares me. I've been through far worse, believe me.

"I've always made it clear, every time I had the chance, that leaving for another club would only happen if it was also good for the

club. If it wasn't, I would never accept it. Just like I didn't accept it when everything was going badly and they needed me. I stayed and gave everything. So, I hope they treat my situation with the same respect I've always shown Spurs and everyone who worked with me during this period. Just don't try to decide for me."

Richarlison insisted he would be happy to rejoin Everton, where he played from 2018 to 2022.

The 29-year-old has struggled to make an impact at Tottenham since his move to north London four years ago.

"If they reach an agreement between Spurs and Everton, I will return to my beloved club. My intention was to go back to the place where I was very happy, yes, but the negotiations happened only in the way certain people wanted, and it will no longer be like that," he said.

"Despite all this turmoil, I am under contract at Spurs and will remain at the club's disposal."

Richarlison, who has been candid in the past about his mental health struggles, scored 12 goals during the 2025-26 campaign as Tottenham narrowly avoided relegation from the Premier League.

FOCUS

Malen nets brace as Roma beat Lecce to go top in Serie A

AFP
Rome

Dutch international Donyell Malen was the hero again as Roma ran Lecce ragged in Serie A with a mesmerising 4-0 away win where the in-form forward scored twice. Malen's brace, bolstered by the hat-trick he scored in Roma's 4-0 thumping of Fiorentina last week, took his tally to 19 goals from 20 league matches since joining

from Aston Villa in January. Veteran coach Gian Piero Gasperini described Roma's performance as top calibre last week and this latest performance at a packed Lecce stadium was of the same ilk.

Champions Inter Milan, Ruben Amorim's AC Milan, Juventus and Lazio all also have six points after two matches. Gasperini's men rushed Lecce with waves of lightening breaks as Malen netted a double inside the opening 24 minutes.

Matias Soule is rumoured to be leaving Roma but scored the third

on 25 minutes, while new arrival the 19-year-old Portuguese midfielder Rodrigo Mora completed the rout just after the hour.

BENZEMA ENDS BRIEF STINT WITH SAUDI'S AL HILAL

Former France and Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema has left Al Hilal just under eight months after joining the Saudi club.

The former Ballon d'Or winner moved to Saudi Arabia from Real Madrid in 2023, joining Al Ittihad and leading the Jeddah club to a

Saudi Pro League title in 2025.

After a dispute over a contract extension in late January he moved to Al Hilal in Riyadh for the rest of the season. He had one year left on his contract, but has a deal until 2030 as an "ambassador" for Saudi tourism and the 2034 World Cup.

Al Hilal signed 30-year-old England forward Ollie Watkins from Aston Villa for a reported £50mn (\$68mn). Reports said that Benzema had no intention of retiring and had offers from the American MLS and other Saudi clubs.



Roma's Donyell Malen scores against Lecce. (Reuters)