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CRICKET | Page 2

Samson fires
India to T20
series win over
Afghanistan



ATHLETICS | Page 3

‘Kenya’s moment’
as Nairobi to
host 2029 world
athletics champs

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Page 4

ASIAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Al Gharafa suffer narrow defeat to Al Hilal in opener

Both sides were reduced to 10 men in the first half in Riyadh

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Qatar’s Al Gharafa gave Al Hilal a stern test before going down 2-1 to the Saudi Arabian giants in their opening Asian Champions League Elite match in Riyadh yesterday.

Al Hilal, bidding for a fifth Asian title, made the brighter start but the game was disrupted midway through the first half when both sides were reduced to 10 men.

Al Gharafa took the game to Al Hilal in the opening minutes as Yassine Bounou was forced to make saves to deny Adam Ounas and Jang Hyun-soo as the home side started with 18-year-old Kader Meite up front.

Al Hilal worked their way into the game with Gabriel Martinelli having a left foot effort from an acute angle saved by Ahmed Kone before Sergej Milinkovic-Savic nodded over unchallenged from a good position.

The game took a turn in the 32nd minute when Cryscenco Summerville was shown the red card for shoving Abdulrahman al-Rasheedi off the field but in the heated exchange, Ismael Bennacer was also sent off for tugging at the Al Hilal forward’s hair.

Al-Rasheedi was involved again when he tripped Saimon Bouabre in the box, gifting Al Hilal a late first half penalty which Ruben Neves nervlessly slotted home in the third minute of added time. Al Hilal continued to test Kone’s reflexes after the interval with Neves, Martinelli and Bouabre all having a go but the Al Gharafa custodian stood strong to keep the Qatari side in the game.

Maintaining sustained pressure, it was no surprise when the second goal arrived in the 72nd minute, Neves delivered a perfect cross to the back post for Milinkovic-Savic to power home from close range.



Al Gharafa and Al Hilal players battle for the ball in Riyadh.

Al Gharafa struck in stoppage time through a spectacular Alaaeddin Hasan strike from outside the box but it was nothing more than a consolation with the final whistle blowing seconds after the restart.

A tough test awaits Al Hilal next as the Saudi Pro League side face another Qatari side in Al Sadd on October 13 while Al Gharafa will count on home advantage when they host Esteghlal FC of Iran a day earlier.

In Al Ain, Houssine Rahimi struck twice to take Al Ain FC to a 4-0 win over Cristiano Ronaldo’s Al Nassr.

Rahimi netted in the 25th minute and followed up with a second after the break before his brother Soufiane added a third in the 72nd minute, with Giorgos Giakoumakis wrapping up five minutes before the end to give the former champions from the United Arab Emirates a well-deserved opening win.

SQUASH

Asal, El Hammamy power into Qatar Classic semi-finals

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Egyptian World No. 1 Mostafa Asal booked his place in the semi-finals of the Qatar Classic squash after defeating compatriot and world No. 8 Aly Abou Eleinen 3-1 in a thrilling quarter-final yesterday.

Asal prevailed 11-5, 11-4, 12-14, 12-10 in a gruelling 91-minute battle on the main glass court at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex.

“The match was difficult. Abou Eleinen is a very skilled player, and I knew it would be a tough battle. However, I managed to take control of the match and secure the victory. I hope I can continue this performance and win the title this year,” Asal said.

The top seed will face England’s world No. 7 Marwan ElShorbagy in tomorrow’s semi-final. ElShorbagy earned his place in the last four after overcoming France’s Gregoire Marche 3-2 in a 52-minute encounter, winning 11-5, 11-9, 1-11, 3-11, 11-7.

In the women’s draw, Egyptian world No. 1 Hania El Hammamy advanced to the semi-finals without taking to the court after compatriot Nouran Gohar withdrew from their quarter-final due to injury. The defending champion now faces a stern test against in-form Malaysian world No. 4 Sivasangari Subramaniam, who also progressed without playing after Belgian opponent Tinne Gils withdrew through injury. With both semi-finals set to feature high-ranked contenders, the Qatar Classic is poised for an exciting finish as the leading Egyptian stars continue their pursuit of the titles.

Sivasangari has established herself as one of Malaysia’s leading squash players in recent years, producing a series of impressive performances on the international stage. She won the gold medal at the 2022 Asian Games and went on to claim the 2024 London Classic title, defeating several of Egypt’s leading players during her campaign. She added another major achievement to her resume by winning the Australian Open in 2026.

The remaining men’s quarter-finals are scheduled to conclude today, with New Zealand’s world No. 2 and defending champion Paul Coll taking on France’s World No. 5 Victor Crouin.

In an all-Egyptian clash, World No. 4 Karim Abdel Gawad will face compatriot Youssef Soliman for a place in the semi-finals.

In the women’s draw, Egyptian World No. 2 Amina Orfi will meet compatriot and World No. 6 Fayrouz Aboelkheir, while Malaysia’s World No. 25 Rachel Arnold will face England’s Jasmine Hutton. Arnold reached the quarter-finals after producing one of the tournament’s biggest upsets, defeating World No. 3 Nour El Sherbini in the second round.

The victory ended El Sherbini’s title defence. The Egyptian is an eight-time world champion and won the Qatar Classic in 2024.



World No. 1 Mostafa Asal continued his quest for a first Qatar Classic title in dramatic style, overcoming Aly Abou Eleinen.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Moreno demands best from Rayyan

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Al Rayyan coach Vicente Moreno has urged his players to produce their best as they begin their AFC Champions League Two campaign against Jordanian side Al Faisaly at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium tonight.

“We are eagerly looking forward to playing against Al Faisaly tomorrow in the AFC Champions League Two,” Moreno said at the pre-match press conference.

“We know we are facing a good team and that it will be a very difficult match, but we are playing at home and are determined to secure a win in our opening game.”

The match marks Al Rayyan’s first appearance in the AFC Champions League Two, with the Qatari club last featuring in the AFC Cup in 2010. Their opponents, two-time AFC Cup winners Al Faisaly, finished runners-up in the Jordanian Pro League last season.

Al Rayyan have made a strong start to the Qatar Stars League and sit second after four matches, just two points behind leaders Al Sadd. Moreno believes that form can provide confidence, but stressed that his players must remain focused on the task ahead.

“Past results give us great confidence heading into tomorrow’s match. It is very important for us, but our focus right now is solely on tomorrow’s game. Previous matches are over; right now, we know we must think only about tomorrow’s match,” he said.

Moreno acknowledged the challenge of facing an opponent from a different league, saying Al Rayyan did not have a complete picture of Al Faisaly’s level. “It is a different competition. We are ready to play in the league, ready for the Qatar Cup, and ready to face Al Faisaly in the Champions League,” he said. “How-



Today’s match against Al Faisaly marks Al Rayyan’s first appearance in the AFC Champions League Two, with the Qatari club last featuring in the AFC Cup in 2010.

ever, it is true that sometimes I do not know the opponent’s exact level because they play in a different league. We are entering tomorrow’s match without knowing their precise level, which is a challenge for us. But I repeat: we are ready, we respect the opponent greatly, and I have immense confidence in my players. I told them that if we want to win tomorrow, we must be at our very best.”

Al Rayyan have conceded only two goals in their four league matches, and Moreno was pleased with the team’s defensive solidity while calling for greater efficiency in attack. “We have a very good defence, and certainly

a very good attack as well, because we are Al Rayyan, and Al Rayyan possesses very talented players,” he said. “However, we always want to improve our performance. Ideally, we would not concede any goals, though that is very difficult to achieve. We want to improve and score more goals. In recent league matches, we created plenty of scoring opportunities, and we need to capitalise on those situations.”

Moreno also provided an update on striker Aleksandar Mitrovic, who remains sidelined as he continues his recovery. “Mitrovic is currently sidelined. While he did begin training with us last week, he is only performing specific drills. He needs more training time to get up to speed, and I believe he could start playing after the upcoming break,” he said. “We also have a few players dealing with minor issues, and we will decide on their status tomorrow. It is normal to have players managing slight knocks from time to time.”

Midfielder Julien De Sart said Al Rayyan were determined to make a strong start to their continental campaign. “We expect a tough match. We know we must give our best in every game to stand a chance of winning,” he said. “As the coach mentioned, we are entering this tournament with great ambition. It is an honour to play in the AFC Champions League Two. We will take it one match at a time and aim to go as far as possible.”

De Sart, who has had to contend with injuries and time on the bench, said he was ready to contribute whenever called upon. “That’s football. I believe that throughout your career, you go through periods of injury or time on the bench, and you simply have to adapt to the circumstances,” he said.

“I feel I am constantly improving; the more I play, the better I feel. So, if the coach needs me tomorrow, I am ready, and if I’m on the bench, well, that’s just football. Regardless of how long I play, I will try to give my best.”

Defeat to South Korea dents Qatar’s quarter-final hopes at Asian Games



Qatar were handed a 4-1 defeat by South Korea in their opening football match at the 2026 Asian Games in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan. Eom Ji-sung scored a hat-trick for the Koreans, finding the net in the seventh, 20th and first-half stoppage time minutes. Kim Myung-jun added the fourth in the 65th minute. Qatar pulled one back through Marwan Sharif in the 85th minute, but the Koreans comfortably held on to start their campaign with a convincing victory. Qatar will face Saudi Arabia in their second and final group match on Friday, with the top two teams from the group advancing to the quarter-finals.

CRICKET

Samson sparkles as India hammer Afghanistan

The wicketkeeper-batsman scores 57 as India win by 7 wickets

AFP
New Delhi

Wicketkeeper-batsman Sanju Samson struck 57 off 22 balls to lead India to a dominant seven-wicket win over Afghanistan in the second T20 international and clinch the series yesterday.

India chased down a victory target of 160 with 5.1 overs to spare to take an unbeatable 2-0 lead in the three-match series at New Delhi's Arun Jaitley Stadium.

Abhishek Sharma, who hit 39 off 19 balls, and fellow opener Samson put on 88 runs to put the team on course.

Abhishek started briskly and Samson soon took over to hit the ball to all parts of the ground as he struck sixes and fours including in a 27-run sixth over by Mohammad Nabi.

Leg-spinner Rashid Khan cut short Abhishek's knock a ball after being hit for a six by the swashbuckling left-hander, who hit 82 in India's opening win also by seven wickets.

Samson reached his fifty in 20 balls to raise the noise of the home crowd but departed two balls later off Nabi. He hit seven fours and four sixes.

Skipper Shreyas Iyer fell on 11 before Ishan Kishan, who made 38, and Tilak Varma (15) guided the team home in an unbeaten stand of 40.

Earlier, Iyer won his 11th toss, the most by a captain in his first 12 T20 matches, surpassing 10 each by Qatar's Mirza Baig and



India's Sanju Samson plays a shot during the second T20 international against Afghanistan in New Delhi yesterday. (AFP)

Henry Tyler of Philippines. Bowlers backed the decision and kept Afghanistan down to 159-8 with seam bowler Nitish Kumar Reddy returning figures of 3-24.

Pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah started with a maiden over and fellow quick Arshdeep Singh reaped the benefit as he sent back Rahmanullah Gurabaz, caught behind for a duck.

Skipper Ibrahim Zadran attempted to hit back with his brisk 37 as he struck six fours in a 51-run partnership with Sediqullah

Atal, who made 12. Reddy broke the stand on his first ball as he got the batsman caught at deep mid-wicket.

Reddy got one more after leg-spinner Ravi Bishnoi, who came in place of injured Varun Chakravarthy, sent back Atal and Afghanistan slipped to 67-4 in 10.1 overs.

Indian bowlers struck regular blows to rattle the opposition batting despite some lower-order resistance by Nabi (20) and Rashid, who made 28.

Reddy dismissed Rashid for his third strike as visitors Afghanistan, who made 156-8 in the opener, once again finished on a below-par total on the batting-friendly pitch.

The third match is tomorrow at the same venue.

BRIEF SCORES

India 163 for 3 (Samson 57, Abhishek 39, Kishan 38*, Rashid 3-36) **beat Afghanistan 159 for 8** (Zadran 37, Reddy 3-24) **by seven wickets**

SPOTLIGHT

Australia beat Zimbabwe as Renshaw smashes 109

AFP
Harare

Australia's Matt Renshaw scored a maiden one-day international century while Nathan Ellis took five wickets to guide their side to a 59-run win over hosts Zimbabwe yesterday in the first clash of their three-match series.

Australia chose to bat first, and the surprise decision from captain Mitchell Marsh was vindicated as they scored 294-8 in their 50 overs, setting Zimbabwe an imposing target at Harare Sports Club.

In reply, Zimbabwe were dismissed for 235 in 45.1 overs, showing good fight but always behind the required run rate.

Renshaw, who last scored an international ton in a Test against Pakistan in 2017, made 109 and featured in key partnerships after Cooper Connolly survived a few let-offs before being bowled by Zimbabwe captain Sikandar Raza for 51.

Renshaw put on 72 runs with Alex Carey for the fifth wicket and 75 with Ollie Peake for the sixth wicket, leaving Zimbabwe with a required run rate of 5.90.

The 20-year-old left-arm quick Newman Nyamhuri finished with 5-62, only the second



Australia's Matthew Renshaw raises his bat after completing a century during the first One Day International against Zimbabwe at Harare Sports Club yesterday. (AFP)

Zimbabwe bowler to take five wickets in an ODI against Australia.

Zimbabwe lost four wickets quickly before Craig Ervine and Sikandar steadied the innings with a 98-run partnership that offered them hope of victory on a surface that traditionally gets better for batting as the day wears on.

Nathan Ellis had taken two wickets in his first spell, and when he was reintroduced, took three balls to clean bowl Ervine for 59 and put the brakes on the home side. Sikandar was yorked by Spencer Johnson for 57 to leave Zimbabwe still significantly adrift.

Ellis finished with 5-31 in 9.1 overs, also cleaning up the tail.

The second ODI is on Friday, and the last on Sunday, all in Harare, after which Australia moves onto a similar series with neighbouring South Africa.

BRIEF SCORES

Australia 294 for 8 (Renshaw 109, Connolly 51, Nyamhuri 5-62) **beat Zimbabwe 235** (Ervine 59, Raza 57, Ellis 5-31) **by 59 runs**

Zimbabwe's Taylor takes over from Tendulkar as longest-serving ODI player

HARARE: Brendan Taylor replaced India great Sachin Tendulkar as the longest-serving one-day international player yesterday after the Zimbabwe veteran took the field for the series opener against Australia in Harare. Taylor's ODI career now spans 22 years and four months, taking the mantle from Tendulkar, who retired from the 50-overs format in 2012 after playing for 22 years and three months. Tendulkar remains the highest run-scorer in ODIs (18,426) and the format's most capped

player with 463 appearances. Taylor, 40, emerged as one of Zimbabwe's most prolific talents in 2004 and has scored a national record 11 hundreds in 207 ODI games heading into Tuesday's match. Taylor retired in 2021 and was banned for three and half years in 2022 for breaching the ICC's Anti-Corruption and Anti-Doping codes. After serving the suspension he came out of retirement in 2025 with Zimbabwe gearing up to co-host next year's ODI World Cup with South Africa and Namibia.



Brendon Taylor (with gloves) of Zimbabwe is seen with his teammates during the first ODI against Australia in Harare yesterday.

CYCLING

Pidcock to lead strong British team at worlds, eyeing double

AFP
London

Tom Pidcock will lead a strong British contingent at the UCI Road World Championships in Montreal later this month as he bids for an unprecedented double.

No male rider has ever won world titles in cross-country and road in the same year but, after Pidcock's triumph on his mountain bike in Val di Sole, Italy, last month and the absence of Tadej Pogacar, he will be one of the favourites.

The 27-year-old will not be short of top-quality British support in Montreal with Adam Yates, a key lieutenant of Pogacar in the UAE Team Emirates XRG outfit, Oscar Onley and Fred Wright also selected for the road race.

Pidcock, who finished ninth in this year's Tour de France, got his first look at the world championship course at last week's 214km GP de Montreal where he finished sixth in a high-class race won by Mexico's Isaac Del Toro.

The world title will be battled out over 273km including 12 punishing laps of the Mount Royal circuit and Pidcock expressed quiet confidence that the course could suit him.

"On this course, you really need to have the legs for the last two laps," Pidcock said. "It's a good course for me; I've done well here before. But I'm not the top favourite. As Great Britain, we're going to go for it, and the more riders



we have in the final, the better our chances of becoming world champions."

The only rider to hold the cross-country and road world titles simultaneously was France's Pauline Ferrand-Prevot, who won the road title in 2014 and the cross-country in 2015.

Pidcock picks out Del Toro and Paul Seixas as the favourites for what he expects to be an 'attritional' race but says the absence of Pogacar after the Slovenian's crash at the Vuelta a Espana does increase his chances.

"Tadej is the hardest rider to beat, and he's not here. That means the second-best rider is easier to beat," Pidcock, who is trying to become the first Briton to win the men's world title since Mark Cavendish in 2011, said.

Zoe Backstedt and Cat Ferguson will lead Britain's women's road challenge while Ethan Hayter, who was piped to victory by Pogacar in Vuelta opening day time trial, will race the TT.

Comeback in works? Woods, 50, spotted on course

NEW YORK: Tiger Woods was spotted working on his tee shot yesterday morning at Liberty National Golf Club in New Jersey. The short video clip circulating online has many wondering if Woods is eyeing a return to competitive golf. He hasn't committed to that. He is in the Garden State in advance of The Nexus Cup, an exclusive amateur team competition hosted by Woods that benefits Woods' TGR Foundation. On Tuesday, the 15-time major champion was taking part in a clinic that is part of the event. In front of a crowd that had gathered to get tips from Woods, he answered a question about the status of his game, which has been interrupted by both medical

and legal issues. "I can hit pretty much anything," he said. The video comes nearly two weeks after Woods pleaded no contest to willful, wanton and reckless driving and refusing to submit to a urine test in a brief hearing at the Martin County Courthouse in Martin, Florida. Woods, 50, agreed to two concurrent five-year suspensions of his driver's license and was fined \$1,000 in exchange for a DUI charge originating from his March crash on a residential road being dropped. Woods hasn't competed in a major tournament or even a competitive event at all since 2024. His health has played a significant role in his lack of professional activities in recent years.

FOCUS

PGA Tour says it is not considering return program for LIV players



Reuters
New York

The PGA Tour is not considering a returning member program that would allow players from LIV Golf to come back to the US-based circuit like Brooks Koepka did earlier this year, Commissioner Brian Rolapp said yesterday.

Rolapp, speaking to reporters on a virtual media call one week after LIV Golf filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in New Jersey, said accountability and discipline are essential elements for any sports league and remain guiding principles for the PGA Tour.

"In terms of where we are today, we are not currently contemplating a returning-member program like the one you saw in January," Rolapp said on a call to discuss details of the Tour's two-tiered system set for launch in 2028.

"Everyone at the PGA Tour, myself included, has been focused on what is best for the organization."

LIV's bankruptcy filing has left the playing futures of some of the breakaway circuit's biggest names

in doubt. Major champions Jon Rahm and Bryson DeChambeau, two of the sport's more popular players, were listed as the top unsecured creditors with each owed more than \$5mn.

Five-times major champion Koepka took advantage of a limited-time returning member program in January to rejoin the PGA Tour after leaving LIV Golf last December.

Koepka's return came at a cost, with the former world number one facing a five-year forfeiture of potential equity in the PGA Tour's Player Equity Program, representing an estimated \$50-85mn loss depending on his performance and tour growth.

LIV has been preparing for its next iteration ever since the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia said in April that further investment in the rebel circuit no longer aligned with its strategy and that it would cut funding at the close of the 2026 season.

PIF owns 100% of LIV Golf's equity, according to its bankruptcy petition.

LIV hopes to exit from bankruptcy by early 2027.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Nairobi to host 2029 world athletics in African first

‘This is Kenya’s moment and a victory for generations of athletes who made our nation synonymous with excellence’

AFP
Paris

Nairobi will host the 2029 world outdoor athletics championships, beating off competition from London, Munich and Rome to become the first African hosts, World Athletics announced yesterday.

The 2031 championships will be held in Munich, track and field’s governing body said after a council meeting in Budapest, host to the recently-concluded Ultimate Championship.

“We were fortunate to have four outstanding bids for 2029 and 2031, and this was not an easy decision for the council,” World Athletics president Sebastian Coe told a press conference.

The 2027 event has already been awarded to Beijing.

“This council decision today means we’re able to deliver our World Athletics Championships in Asia, Africa, and Europe over its next three editions,” the Briton added.

“Taking our championships to Africa for the first time will be historic. Nairobi has presented a compelling and an emotional bid.”

Kenyan President William Ruto hailed Nairobi’s successful bid, saying: “This is Kenya’s moment, Africa’s moment and a victory for generations of athletes who made our nation synonymous with excellence on the track, on the road and cross country.”

Coe added: “It was important that the world championship should come to Africa when we had the right host, the right bid, and the right circumstances.

“Nairobi has demonstrated emphatically that this is their moment to supercharge the development of our sport in Kenya and across Africa, leaving a compelling legacy that inspires a continent.”

Kenya, which failed with a bid



Nairobi also staged the 2010 African Athletics Championships.

for the 2025 world championships, has previously hosted the 2007 World Cross Country Championships in Mombasa, the World under-18 Championships in Nairobi in 2017 and the World under-20 Championships in the capital in 2021.

Nairobi also staged the 2010 African Athletics Championships.

“Having also been part of the bidding process for 2025, the (Nairobi) team understood and grasped what was required, and came back with a stronger proposition, and a renovated Kasarani Stadium, which is currently undergoing a complete overhaul ahead of hosting the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) 2027,” said Coe.

“Athletics is woven into the fabric of Kenya,” Coe added, name dropping world and Olympic middle distance star Faith Kipyegon as one of many Kenyan athletes to “have shaped the history of our sport” and also praising the “ex-

traordinary” level of fan engagement in the east African country.

One concern, however, will be Kenya’s track record on anti-doping, with more than 140 Kenyan athletes, mainly long-distance runners, having been suspended by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) for taking banned substances since 2017 - more than those from any other country.

Turning to Munich, which most recently hosted at the city’s Olympic Park the 2022 European Athletics Championships, Coe said: “Germany has proved time and time again that it is an outstanding and creative host for major athletics events.

“We know Germany has an audience for athletics, and we know Munich 2031 has all the ingredients to be a spectacular World Athletics Championships.”

Coe played down the fact that three consecutive world championships would be held away

from Europe, despite describing the continent as a track and field “heartland”.

“We openly accept that it is in large part the breadbasket of our sport.

“But we do also have a responsibility to make sure that an international governing federation, made up of well over 200 federations, has the opportunity to be able to take our championships into areas that strategically we think will actually grow the footprint of our sport.”

Coe added that there had been “a lot of interest” in hosting the 2028 edition of the Ultimate Championship, created this year as a three-day, season-ending competition bringing the best of the best together.

“There’s already heightened interest in wanting to stage those championships,” he said, with World Athletics aiming to name the host city by the end of the year.

Kenya celebrates as athletics comes ‘home’

Athletics-mad Kenya rejoiced yesterday after Nairobi was selected to host the 2029 world championships, becoming the first African city to stage the event.

The Kenyan capital beat hotly-tipped London as well as Rome and Munich, which was awarded the 2031 event by the sport’s governing body World Athletics. Kenyan officials said the decision to award the championships to the African continent for their first time in their 43-year history was recognition that the east African nation is one of the sport’s powerhouses.

The National Olympic Committee of Kenya (NOC-K) President Shadrack Maluki said it “reflects the country’s rich athletics heritage (and the) exceptional talent and potential of Kenyan athletes”.

Kenyan athletes were elated, with African 100 metres record holder Ferdinand Omanyala telling AFP it was “a dream come true”.

“I’ve always wanted to compete against the best of the best at home. I run best at home, and I’m glad this will happen,” Omanyala said.

“I need to do something big for the World Athletics Championships in 2029,” said the 30-year-old.

“This will be good inspiration for sprinters and the next generation.”

Paul Tergat, a former marathon world record holder, called it “truly momentous” and said Nairobi and Kenya “deserve this honour”.

Welcoming the decision, announced in Budapest, Kenya Athletics president Jackson Tuwei

said it was “an opportunity to bring the world’s greatest athletics championship to the home of so many champions”.

He added: “Kenya is known around the world as the home of champions. Our athletes have inspired generations through their performances on the track, on the roads and across the country’s many running trails.”

However, hosting the second-biggest track and field event outside of the Olympics will also shine a fierce spotlight on Kenya’s deep problems with doping. More than 140 Kenyan athletes, mainly long-distance runners, have been suspended for doping offences by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) since 2017.

Martin Sisa Nyauma, head of education and research at Kenya’s anti-doping agency (ADAK) told AFP that by placing the world championships in the country, World Athletics had “shown the confidence they have in Kenya and appreciate the love they still have for the country despite our past record on doping”.

“This shows that our work to have our athletes running clean in cooperation with the World Athletics Integrity Unit over the last three years is a success. We have seen fewer athletes being suspended than previously. This gives us hope that we’re succeeding,” he said.

Praise too came from Kenya’s neighbours, with Ethiopian track and marathon legend Haile Gebrselassie saying on X he was “so proud” that Africa would finally have the chance to host the world championships.

(AFP)

FOCUS

Asian Games cruise ship arrives as accommodation complaints grow

AFP
Nagoya, Japan

A cruise ship that will house thousands of athletes at the Asian Games arrived in Japan yesterday as complaints over accommodation at the multi-sport event grew louder.

The Italian cruise ship Costa Serena docked in Nagoya, where the Games are taking place until October 4.

Around 4,000 athletes and officials will be housed on the ship, which is almost 300m long, weighs over 100,000 tonnes and has 1,500 cabins.

More than 17,000 athletes and officials are expected at the Games, which officially open on Saturday, a bigger number than the Olympics.

Participants will also stay in wooden container-style huts and standard hotel rooms in a bid to cut costs.

South Korean officials said earlier this week that the container hut rooms were the “worst ever” and claimed on Tuesday that concerns had been shared by every team at the Games.

Local organising committee president Hideaki Omura said the temporary accommodation could be a model for hosting financial-

ly sustainable sporting events. “This is the first time in Japan that a cruise ship is being used as accommodation for a big international sporting event,” Omura said at a ceremony to welcome the cruise ship to Nagoya.

“We’re happy that we can provide a new type of accommodation for a large-scale event like this.”

Cruise ships have been used previously as accommodation at international sporting events, but never on this scale.

Jung Jae-yong, vice president of the Korea Basketball Association, told AFP he was deeply unhappy with the cabins where the men’s basketball team are staying.

He said beds were too small for the athletes, and a player from the team posted a video on social media showing a leaking sink and soaked floor in his hut.

He posted the caption: “Please help us”.

Hundreds of athletes were briefly evacuated from their accommodation last week as record rainfall lashed Nagoya causing flooding.

A South Korean Olympic committee official said there was “a serious shortage” of rooms and they were not alone in finding the accommodation lacking.

“Concerns over the accommodations have been shared by all

representatives of the 45 nations competing in the games,” a South Korean Sports and Olympic Committee official told AFP yesterday.

“Every country involved is now working together to resolve the issue.”

A Taiwanese sport official said there was “a general shortage of beds”.

Philippine Olympic Committee president Abraham Tolentino said all his country’s athletes had been given a room. But “some officials, like coaches, were moved to different hotels and Airbnbs”.

Organisers are hoping there will be fewer complaints about the cruise ship, despite the Games taking place during Japan’s typhoon season.

Organisers said earlier this year that the vessel was being chartered at a cost of about 4.5bn yen (\$28mn).

It is a sister ship of the Costa Concordia, which sank off Tuscany in 2012, killing 32 people.

Costa Serena captain Federico Sias said he hoped the athletes would have a “comfortable, safe and memorable stay”.

He added: “Today, our ship becomes more than a destination.

“It becomes a home where athletes and guests from across Asia can come together in the spirit of friendship, mutual respect and unity.”

SPOTLIGHT

Sri Lanka’s javelin star Pathirage returns to ‘broken’ welcome

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka’s Asian Games medal prospect Rumesh Tharanga Pathirage returned home after winning the title at a top international event yesterday to find his prized javelins in pieces.

The 23-year-old rising star, who has taken the javelin world by storm this year with a series of impressive victories, was heartbroken to discover that his javelins had snapped.

“This was a rude shock,” Pathirage’s coach, Tony Prasanna, told AFP. “We checked in five javelins - all packed extremely carefully and well - but all of them arrived broken.”

Pathirage posted a photograph of his damaged javelins on social media, listing the distance he had thrown them; “85.98, 92.62, 88.50, 89.20, 89.37, 88.20, 89.68, 92.06, 91.06 good bye”.

Pathirage was returning from the World Athletics Ultimate Championships in Hungary on Turkish Airlines, and had lodged a complaint.

There was no immediate comment from the airline.

“It is not the cost of a javelin, which is quite high, but the emotional attachment,” Prasanna



Sri Lanka’s Rumesh Tharanga Pathirage, winner of the men’s javelin final, poses with Ultimate Championship trophy at the Gyula Zsivotzky National Athletics Centre in Budapest. (AFP)

said. “This is a psychological setback for Rumesh and I will counsel him on it. We were planning to take three of these javelins to the 2028 Olympics and to the Asian Games.”

Sri Lanka’s Ministry of Sports said it would provide new javelins for Pathirage to compete at the Asian Games in Japan’s Nagoya.

“The government will take up this matter with the airline and take appropriate legal action,” the ministry said in a statement.

The ministry said that Pathirage - the first Sri Lankan

to become a Diamond League champion - was the country’s gold-medal hopeful at the Asian Games.

Pathirage hurled a world-leading 92.62 metres (303.87 feet) in the Rome Diamond League meet on June 4, and in Zurich last month his 92.07 saw him become only the fourth man in history to exceed 92m twice. At the Asian Games, he will face Pakistan’s Arshad Nadeem, who holds the Asian record of 92.97m.

India’s javelin star Neeraj Chopra is injured and unable to defend his Asian Games gold.



Security guards direct people near the Costa Serena cruise ship at the Port of Nagoya ahead of the 2026 Asian Games in Nagoya, Aichi prefecture yesterday. (AFP)

UEFA pressure on Infantino grows as Greek FA, Bierhoff back change

Greek Football Association president Makis Gagatsis and former Germany national team director Oliver Bierhoff yesterday backed UEFA’s push for change in FIFA’s leadership, underscoring a united European front in opposition to FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

“The Greek FA (EPO) has taken a clear position against a candidacy of Gianni Infantino,” EPO President Makis Gagatsis told reporters.

“We saw things happen at the World Cup that are not acceptable to football public opinion,” Gagatsis said. “Then... came a programme to sell World Cup rights and we are clearly against it, so we withdrew our support of the FIFA president.”

He was speaking after a meeting of the UEFA Executive Committee in the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki, with a “legends” five-a-side game held in the

city centre to promote UEFA’s grassroots programme. UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin was also present at the event but did not talk to media. Infantino has been under mounting pressure ever since he unveiled a proposal to sell a commercial stake of the World Cup to private investors.

The plan prompted fierce opposition, with UEFA, the Asian Football Confederation and North America’s CONCACAF among those calling for change at the top of FIFA. FIFA quickly abandoned the plan and apologised to member associations for mistakes made, but its leadership reaffirmed support for Infantino after a crisis meeting in August in Morocco. UEFA has been among the staunchest critics of Infantino and have said a change in leadership is now necessary given the loss of trust in Infantino, who is planning to run for re-election in March.

SPOTLIGHT

Flick supporting ‘confident’ Yamal’s Ballon d’Or bid

Yamal had claimed that he and Mbappe were the two best players

AFP

Barcelona

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick said he will support teenage winger Lamine Yamal’s bid to win the Ballon d’Or, noting the player’s “self-confidence” on and off the pitch.

The 19-year-old forward, who won the World Cup with Spain and La Liga with Barca last season, said Sunday he believes he deserves the individual accolade.

Yamal claimed in an interview with *Movistar* that he and Real Madrid striker Kylian Mbappe were the two best players in the world and that his teams’ success should put him first, when the award is decided on October 26. “I think he’s honest, has the self-confidence and shows in the beginning of the season how good he is,” Flick told reporters.

Yamal has scored seven goals in Barca’s last four games, helping the Catalan giants maintain a 100 percent start to the season. Flick said although he would have preferred the teenager not to have spoken about it, he accepts it as part of the winger’s self-belief.

“He’s exceptional and it’s a part of this... I would not prefer this, but he’s doing this. He has self-confidence, he wants to win the Ballon d’Or. As a player it’s an important thing. He’s honest, it’s his feeling and we have to accept it. I will support him of course.”

Flick said Yamal’s confidence was also what makes him such a spectacular player to watch. The youngster made his debut for the club at 15 years old and finished as runner-up in last year’s Ballon d’Or award behind Paris Saint-Germain’s Ousmane Dembele.

“He also shows his self-confidence on the pitch and for us this is important,” continued Flick. “We all want him to play how he plays, and this is a style of confidence. One against one, or two, or three... everyone in the stadium goes ‘wow!’ This is Lamine and I will support him. It’s amazing to have a player like him. When he’s of the opinion he deserves it, I think also he deserves it. He won two titles with us, the World Cup with Spanish national team, why not? There’s a lot of world class players on



Lamine Yamal, who helped Spain win the World Cup and Barcelona lift La Liga last season, believes he deserves the Ballon d’Or, a view shared by his Barca coach Hansi Flick. (Reuters)

the list, so it’s not easy. They will decide and I’ll be very happy when it’s finished.”

Bayern Munich and England striker Harry Kane is also among the favourites to win the Ballon d’Or. La Liga leaders Barca welcome promoted side Racing Santander to Camp Nou today as they bid to maintain their perfect start to the season.

Barcelona’s rebuilt stadium will host the Champions League final in 2029, European

football governing body UEFA announced. Flick, whose contract with the club ends in 2028, said he did not know if he would still be managing Barca by then.

“I’m 100 percent there... as a coach or as a supporter of Barca,” said the coach. “We never know what happens. Football is very fast. I enjoy staying in Barcelona, coaching Barca, this is a fantastic team, but in the end you don’t know what happens.”

FOCUS

Carrick tells United to learn from derby pain

AFP

London

Michael Carrick wants Manchester United to channel the frustration of their derby defeat to Manchester City as they seek to get back on track against Brighton in the League Cup.

United failed to capitalise on Phil Foden’s first-half red card at Old Trafford on Sunday and paid the price when Erling Haaland scored a controversial winner in the 60th minute. The goal was initially disallowed for offside on the field but VAR overturned the decision, even though City’s Enzo Fernandez, who was clearly offside, was interfering with play.

Refereeing body Pro Ref acknowledged an “error of judgement”, saying that the video assistant referee should have recommended an on-field review. Carrick said that his team must move on from their costly defeat as they prepare for Wednesday’s League Cup third-round match against Brighton.

“I understand it’s a new season, it’s a fresh



season and the points tally right now is not what we want it to be, so I’m not hiding from that,” he said. “But it’s more (about) getting winning games, getting that feeling, getting the habit. It’s easier said than done, of course it is, but we’re capable of it.”

United defender Lisandro Martinez called the derby decision an “injustice” – a feeling that Carrick wants his players to use as fuel against in-form Brighton. “The players have got an edge,” he said. “I think they’ve shown that to me since I’ve been here. We’ve had set-

backs and they’ve bounced back particularly well and had some really good performances and good results, so they’ve got an edge. It does give you something when something like that happens (on Sunday) to use moving forward.”

United have a tough task against Brighton, who won 5-0 at Coventry on Sunday and have triumphed in four of their past five trips to Old Trafford in all competitions.

MAN UNITED PRODIGY GABRIEL ASKS TO LEAVE CLUB: REPORTS

Manchester United’s 15-year-old prodigy JJ Gabriel has asked to leave the Premier League club, British media reported. The forward has been tipped as a future star and spent time training with Michael Carrick’s side before making his first senior appearance off the bench in last month’s friendly against Atletico Madrid. He had been expected to make his senior competitive debut in the League Cup third-round match against Brighton at Old Trafford today. Gabriel’s request comes just days after he scored a hat-trick on his UEFA Youth League debut against Sabah.

QFA president meets Palestinian football chief



HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, President of the Qatar Football Association, met Lieutenant General Jibril Rajoub, President of the Palestinian Football Association, at his office. During the meeting, they discussed a number of issues of common interest and ways to enhance cooperation in various fields, reflecting the fraternal ties between the two associations.

Champions League finals set for Munich in 2028 and Barcelona in 2029

Paris: The 2028 Champions League final will be held at the Allianz Arena in Munich and the 2029 final will take place at the rebuilt Camp Nou in Barcelona, UEFA announced.

Munich last hosted the Champions League final in 2025, when Paris Saint-Germain claimed their first title with a 5-0 victory over Inter Milan. The last Champions League final played at Camp Nou was in 1999, a game that ended with Manchester United scoring twice in stoppage time to beat Bayern Munich 2-1.

Spain will thus once again take centre stage, just two years after the 2027 final, which is already scheduled to take place at the Metropolitano in Madrid. The Europa League final will be in Bucharest in 2028 and Belgrade in 2029. The Conference League finals have been awarded to Turin for 2028 and Budapest in 2029. The UEFA Super Cup will take place in Amsterdam in 2027 and in Astana in 2028. For the women’s Champions League, Lyon has been selected to host the Champions League final in 2028 and Cardiff the 2029 final.

SPAIN MANAGER AGREES CONTRACT EXTENSION

Spain’s World Cup-winning coach Luis de la Fuente has agreed a contract extension until 2030 after guiding the men’s national team to back-to-back major titles, media reported. De la Fuente, who led Spain to glory at Euro 2024 before winning the World Cup in July, had a contract in place until 2028. The new deal ensures that de la Fuente will remain in charge when Spain attempt to defend their global title on home soil. Spain will co-host the 2030 World Cup with Morocco and Portugal. Since taking over, de la Fuente’s Spain have been defeated just twice in 41 competitive matches. Reuters have contacted the Royal Spanish Football Federation for comment.

RODRIGUEZ RETIRES FROM COLOMBIAN NATIONAL TEAM

Colombian star James Rodriguez, one of the best players in the country’s history, announced his retirement from the national team after 15 years and three World Cups. “I’m leaving with serenity because I know I gave absolutely everything,” the 35-year-old captain said in a social media video, his eyes welling with tears. Rodriguez powered himself and his country to stardom at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, when Los Cafeteros made the quarter-

finals for the first time. He won the tournament’s Golden Boot as the top scorer and became a global superstar. Despite a nomadic and largely ineffective club career in recent years, he remained an integral part of the Colombia side which reached the Copa America final two years ago.

But at this year’s World Cup he failed to score any goals and was outshone by team-mate Luis Diaz of Bayern Munich. Last week, the former Real Madrid midfielder joined Colombian side Atletico Nacional.

ETO’O COULD FACE PROBE OVER ALLEGED PAYMENT

The Association of Amateur Football Clubs of Cameroon (ACFAC) has called for a probe into the Cameroonian Football Federation and its chief Samuel Eto’o over media reports of alleged graft. Eto’o has been accused of improperly receiving a payment from the Russian Football Federation in connection with a friendly match between the two countries in October 2023.

According to ACFAC the Russian Football Union allegedly violated the terms of its contract with the Cameroonian federation FECAFOT by transferring around 567,000 euros (\$654,000) into a bank account that did not belong to the latter.

The association also announced its intention to file a lawsuit against former Barcelona and Inter Milan striker Eto’o in the Cameroonian courts, as well as a separate legal complaint in Russia against the Russian Football Union.

Last month Eto’o threw his support behind beleaguered FIFA president Gianni Infantino, saying he “hasn’t done anything wrong” despite facing mounting pressure to step down over a controversial World Cup sell-off plan.

COUTINHO REUNITES WITH NEYMAR AT SANTOS

Philippe Coutinho has reunited with his former Brazil teammate Neymar at Santos for the rest of the season, the Brazilian top-flight club said. Coutinho spent five years at Liverpool before joining Barcelona in January 2018, helping them win two LaLiga titles. The pair’s time at Barcelona did not overlap as Neymar left the Spanish side for Paris St Germain in August 2017. Santos shared a video of Coutinho’s arrival, showing him entering the dressing room and being welcomed by Neymar.

“If it’s a dream, I don’t want to wake up,” Neymar told Coutinho.

EUROPA LEAGUE

Sunderland embark on Euro adventure after decades in doldrums

AFP

London

Sunderland will walk out at the Stadium of Light on Wednesday for their first European match in 53 years – the latest milestone in a remarkable recovery for a club that spent decades in the doldrums.

Just over four years ago the Black Cats were languishing in League One – the third tier of English football. But they won promotion to the Championship in 2022 and climbed into the Premier League via the play-offs in May 2025, finishing a surprise seventh in their first season back in the big time. The northeast club have a storied history – only six clubs have more top-flight English titles – but the sixth and last of those came way back in 1936. Sunderland were a byword for glamour in the 1950s, dubbed the “Bank of England club” due to their heavy spending.

But they had relatively little to show for their outlay and last won a major trophy in 1973, when they beat Leeds in the FA Cup final. Despite their prolonged stagnation,

the club, about 12 miles (19 kilometres) from bitter rivals Newcastle, remained one of the best supported in England, attracting crowds of 30,000-plus even in League One.

Now the 49,000-capacity Stadium of Light, opened in 1997, is staging Premier League football again and preparing to host continental football for the first time. The European journey is rich reward for Kyril Louis-Dreyfus, son of the late Marseille owner and billionaire Robert Louis-Dreyfus, who bought a stake in the club in 2021 and has since increased his shareholding.

The appointment of Regis Le Bris as head coach in June 2024 proved a masterstroke – the Frenchman took the club back into the Premier League at the first attempt and they defied the odds last season.

Sunderland, led by inspirational captain Granit Xhaka, are now gearing up to face AZ Alkmaar after a patchy start to their season.

“It’s a symbol for the club. We are getting better, the momentum is big and for our fans it is going be crazy to be fair,” Le Bris said. “We are really proud to be in this

position. We earned this opportunity last season with a great season. We had tough moments but at the end we stayed consistent. It’s important to show our desire, to show the city, our togetherness, the connection with our fans.”

For fans of Sunderland, the journey in recent years has been dizzying. “Supporting Sunderland has gone from being a solemn duty, which you used to curse the misfortune of your postcode and/or your parents for, to something that, for the first time in generations, is bringing joy to people’s lives,” Michael Lough wrote on the Wise Men Say website.

“Usually, the higher up the pyramid you go, the hollower and more soulless the experience becomes, and the wider the disconnect between the fans and the players grows. Regis Le Bris likes to use the word ‘connected’ in his press conferences, and I can’t remember the last time the city, the players, the fans and the club felt this level of connection.”

Joining Sunderland in the Europa League this season are Bournemouth, who are playing continental football for the first time in their history. Andoni Iraola led

the southcoast club to a sixth-place finish last season but then left for the Liverpool hot seat, meaning Marco Rose will be in charge.

Bournemouth, who travel to Spain to face Real Sociedad on Thursday, are yet to win in the Premier League this season despite leading in all four games after developing a frustrating habit of conceding late goals.

“Everyone here in Bournemouth is looking forward to this game,” said German coach Rose. “It’s going to be a special night for the club against top opposition. I’m really proud to be part of this.”

A third English club, Crystal Palace, are in the Europa League courtesy of winning the UEFA Conference League last season. Premier League clubs have dominated the competition in recent seasons thanks to their vast resources with Aston Villa and Tottenham winning the Europa League in the past two seasons.

But the more unheralded trio of English clubs this time could balance the playing field up against some of Europe’s biggest clubs such as AC Milan, Juventus and Benfica.



Sunderland, led by inspirational captain Granit Xhaka, are now gearing up to face AZ Alkmaar in the Europa League after a patchy start to their season. (Reuters)