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VOLLEYBALL

Season opener of Beach Pro Tour from today at Aspire

ELITE16 EVENT IN QATAR ALSO OPENS THE QUALIFICATION PHASE FOR PARIS OLYMPICS 2024

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The 2022 Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour Finals have just ended, but the top teams in international beach volleyball will be back in action this week when Doha hosts the opening event of the 2023 season. The Elite16 tournament at the Aspire Park sports complex from today till Sunday will mark the start of the second season of the Beach Pro Tour after a successful 2022 edition. It will feature the best players in the world in intense competition.

The five-day tournament will reunite 56 teams - 28 each in men's and women's - and it will also mark the start of the race to qualify for the Paris 2024 Olympics. Although the qualification period officially started on January 1, the Doha Elite16 event is the first at which teams from around the world will be able to add points to their Olympic rankings.

At the end of the qualification period, on June 9, 2024, the 17 best-ranked men's and women's teams in the Olympic rankings will qualify for the Games (joining a team from the host country, the winners of the 2023 Beach Volleyball World Championships, and five teams from the five Continental Olympic tournaments). A good result in Doha will certainly provide a valuable head start for the teams that can make deep runs in this week's tournament.

The level of play to be expected at the Doha Elite16 will certainly be high. All 20 teams - ten men's and ten women's - that competed at the 2022 Beach Pro Tour Finals will take part in the event, where they will be joined by several other heavyweights of international beach volleyball.

The women's tournament will have 14 countries represented among the 28 teams set to compete. Leading the way are 2022 Beach Pro Tour champions Kelly Cheng and Sara Hughes of the United States and reigning world champions Eduarda 'Duda' Lisboa and Ana Patricia Ramos of Brazil. Other



Home favourites Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan are among the top teams to compete at the Volleyball Beach Pro Tour Doha this week.

teams to look out for include Australian Tokyo 2020 silver medalists Taliqua Clancy and Mariafe Artacho del Solar. "We're really excited to start Olympic qualification," Mariafe commented. "It's going to be a long season, but it's finally here. Playing in the Beach Pro Tour Finals has been a very good preparation. We haven't been able to play or practice with most of the top teams in the world over the last few months, so it has been really good for us."

Another attraction of the Elite16 tournament held in the Qatari capital will be the first international appearance of Canadian Olympians Brandie Wilkerson and Melissa Humana-Paredes as partners. The two decided to join forces in the final portion of 2022 and will be tested at the highest level of the sport for the first time this week in Doha, entering the tournament as the



seventh-seeded women's duo.

Some familiar faces will also be in action in today's qualifier, including Brazilian and three-time Olympian Talita Antunes, who will pair with Thameila Coradello, German Olympians Julia Sude and Karla Borger, who will be with their new partners Isabel Schneider and Sandra Ittlinger, and Americans Taryn Kloth and Kristen Nuss, who competed at the 2022 Finals.

On the men's side, 20 countries will be represented in the tournament. Reigning Olympic and world champions Anders Mol and Christian Sorum of Norway and home fan favourites Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan are among the top teams set to compete in Doha this week.

"The level in international beach volleyball is so high now that we're not thinking about Olympic qualification as a separate thing," said Paolo Nicolai, the Italian Rio 2016 Olympic silver medalist. "Every match is really going to make a difference so we'll try and focus on one at a time and get the best results we can. That's what my experience tells me. There are 17 spots in the Olympic Ranking and several teams that have what it takes to claim them, so we'll see where we end up."

Italians Adrian Carambula and Alex Ranghieri, who competed in the Finals last week, are the top-ranked team in the qualifier. Another veteran who will need to compete for a main draw spot is Latvian Martins Plavins.

The 37-year-old defender missed most of last season due to injury and will pair with Mihails Samoilovs, the younger brother of his former partner Aleksandrs Samoilovs. The event begins today with 16 men's and women's competing for the last four main draw spots in each gender. The main phase of the tournament runs from tomorrow to Sunday, when the winners in both genders will be determined.

Beach Pro Tour Finals champions Kelly Cheng and Sara Hughes of the United States will be hoping for second successive win in Doha.

CHESS

'Qatar Masters will be held on a larger scale than previous editions'



Qatar Chess Association president Mohamed al-Mudahka

QNA
Doha

Qatar Chess Association (QCA) president Mohamed al-Mudahka expressed his confidence on successful hosting of this year's Qatar Masters, a premier chess tournament which will return to the country after eight years. The event will be seen by elite players take part, including Norway's Grandmaster Magnus Carlsen, who is the reigning five-time World Chess Champion, four-time World Rapid Chess Champion and six-time World Blitz Chess Champion.

The event, scheduled for October 10-20, will carry a total prize fund of \$110,000 with \$25,000 for the winner. In an interview with Qatar New Agency (QNA), al-Mudahka said QCA managed to bring the tournament back after great effort due to busy International Chess Federation (FIDE)'s calendar.

Al-Mudahka said this year's tournament will be held on a larger scale than the 2014 and 2015 editions of

Qatar Masters, hoping the presence of top players will make it a highly successful event.

He said the preparations are underway organisationally, logistically and technically, saying QCA will leave no stone unturned to make this event an unprecedented success. He said there are many options for the venue including Aspire Zone and Lusail Multipurpose Hall that may host the eagerly-awaited competition.

The QCA president said that the Qatar Masters is considered one of the most competitive open tournaments in the world as the line-up includes some of the best players in the world.

"Everyone witnessed the great success of Qatar in organising the 2022 World Cup for the first time in the Arab region and the Middle East. So other sports will certainly follow the same path of success, and we are discussing various projects besides the Qatar Masters tournament. But for me now this is an extremely important event," he said.

Al-Mudahka added that Qatar Masters will grab a lot of attention

as the event will take place after the 19th Asian Games Hangzhou 2022 and will be followed by the launch of the European Chess Clubs Cup and the FIDE Grand Prix, which carry points for World Championship qualification.

The QCA has been hosting several tournaments this season and al-Mudahka said the staging of such tournaments is part of association's specific strategy, aiming to developing the game at the Arab, Asian and international levels.

Optimistic about the future of the game in Qatar, al-Mudahka said the Qatar national chess team will compete in the Arab Chess Championship in Khartoum from Feb. 25 to March 5, followed by an international tournament in Iraq.

Al-Mudahka, who first took over the presidency of the QCA in the General Assembly elections for the 2018-2020 term, said that Qatar maintained its presence in the FIDE Executive Office, with Jo Shen holding the position of financial secretary. Al-Mudahka was elected as Executive Director for International

Relations and Hamad al-Tamimi as a Competitions Committee member.

He also unveiled a national plan to develop the game within schools in a bid to inject new blood in the near future, highlighting the recent local tournaments held in co-operation with some partners, especially the Public Cultural Village (Katara), and Abdullah Abdul Ghani Company.

The Qatar Masters Open was first held in 2014 and won by Chinese Grandmaster Yu Yangyi, while Norwegian Carlsen defeated Yangyi in a play-off to win the next edition in 2015.

Carlsen said he was excited to return to Qatar. "I am very happy to play in the Qatar Masters again. This tournament is very important. All means of comfort are available to all the participants, thanks to the wonderful support provided by the organisers."

"The atmosphere will certainly be fine and the participation is in large numbers and the competitions will be strong. I can't wait for the start of the tournament and play in it," the defending champions said.

GOLF

Mickelson 'at peace' if never plays PGA, Ryder Cup again

'Another major would be a unique, special moment. That's really where I want to thrive'

AFP
Los Angeles

Phil Mickelson says he will be "at peace" if he never plays in a PGA Tour event or Ryder Cup again, nearly one year after his explosive remarks about the Saudi-funded LIV golf series triggered uproar.

In an interview with *Sports Illustrated* published on Monday, the six-time major winner said he was not bothered about the possibility of being frozen out of PGA Tour events for good.

Mickelson was suspended by the PGA Tour last year after being one of the earliest big names to defect to the LIV circuit. Mickelson said in June last year he hoped to play on the PGA Tour again.

However in his remarks to *Sports Illustrated*, the veteran said he was now indifferent to playing on the circuit again.

"If I were never to play another PGA Tour event, I'm totally at peace with it," Mickelson said.

The American said that while he believes pending litigation against the PGA Tour may allow him to legally return to the circuit, he planned to "scale down" his number of events while prioritising majors.

"I'm motivated, but I don't see the benefit to playing more," the 45-time PGA Tour winner said.

"The tournaments where you are going to leave a mark are the majors. That creates a life memory. If I win another Tour event, who cares? It's not like it's going to do anything for how I look at my career. Another major would be a unique, special moment. That's really where I want to thrive. And sure, it would mean a lot to win some LIV events because of the role I've played as it's been created."

Mickelson, once seen as a virtual certainty to be a US Ryder Cup captain at some point, also said he would be fine not being part of the biennial team tournament again.

"I've loved being part of the Ryder Cup as a player 12 times



Team Captain Phil Mickelson of Hy Flyers GC looks on after playing his shot from the 11th tee during the quarter-finals of the LIV Golf Invitational - Miami at Trump National Doral Miami in Doral, Florida, on October 28, 2022. (AFP)

LIV reportedly denied info involving Augusta National members

After requesting records of communications involving members of Augusta National to assist with its lawsuit against the PGA Tour, LIV Golf was denied in court on Monday, according to Golfweek.

The reported request came as part of subpoenas that LIV Golf attorneys dished out to former PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem and past and present policy board directors of the PGA Tour. LIV sought communications between those parties "and any member of Augusta National relating to a New Tour, including but not limited to LIV Golf," per Golfweek. Lawyers representing LIV Golf attempted to make a case that former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Stephens Bank CEO Warren Stephens were pushing the Department of Justice to avoid investigating the PGA Tour. On Monday, though, Magistrate

Judge Susan Van Keulen struck down the request in the US District Court of Northern California.

"The cited documents do not implicate in any way the Subpoenaed Parties. Nor do they reflect communications by or between the identified additional targets," Van Keulen's ruling read. "Indeed, for the most part, the identified targets appear merely as names on lists or in other oblique references made by others."

"Any connection between an identified target and a Subpoenaed Party, based on the cited documents, is highly speculative." LIV Golf attorneys accused the PGA Tour of illegally suspending players that were competing in LIV, with their most recent grievance surrounding the Tour's threats of preventing golfers from playing in the Masters.

However, Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley fired back, confirming in December that past Masters champions such as Phil Mickelson, Dustin Johnson and Patrick Reed - who are all currently playing on the LIV circuit - would be welcomed to play in the 2023 Masters. "We will invite those eligible under our current criteria to compete in the 2023 Masters Tournament," Ridley wrote. "Regrettably, recent actions have divided men's professional golf by diminishing the virtues of the game and the meaningful legacies of those who built it. "Although we are disappointed in these developments, our focus is to honour the tradition of bringing together a preeminent field of golfers this coming April." Ridley did note that there could be revisions of the eligibility criteria.

and as a vice captain once," Mickelson said.

"I've had more great experiences than probably anybody. If I'm not a part of it, I'm at peace

with that as well."

Mickelson meanwhile agreed there could be an uneasy atmosphere at the Champions Dinner at the Masters in April, where

staunch critics of LIV Golf including Tiger Woods will dine alongside some of the upstart circuit's biggest names.

Asked if he anticipated awk-

wardness or unpleasantness at the dinner, Mickelson added: "There very well could be, but not on my part. I'm very comfortable with where I'm at."

ATHLETICS

Farah says 2023 London Marathon will be his last

AFP
London

British athletics great Mo Farah has said this year's London Marathon will likely be his last as he contemplates the end of a brilliant career.

The 40-year-old is best known for his success on the track winning gold in the 5,000 and 10,000 metres at both the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympic Games, as well as several world titles across both distances.

And while his marathon career has reached nothing like the same heights, Farah is keen to run in London again after missing last year's edition even though he will be 40 by the time of the April 23 race.

"It's been an amazing career and taking part in the London Marathon is a very big deal," he said in a statement issued by event organisers. "I was gutted not to race last year and I just want to give it one more shot."

"It depends on my body. I just want to get to the start line and see what I can manage. I'm just taking one race at a time."

He added: "I'm not a spring chicken any more. You can't keep coming back in the right shape and, for me, I'd love to be able to finish it at home."

Farah has ruled out competing at the 2024 Olympics in Paris, but may yet try to finish his time as a British international at this year's World Championships in Budapest. "I'm not going to go to the Olympics and I think 2023 will be my last year," he added.

"But if it came down to it towards the end of the year and you did get picked for your country, I'd never turn that down."

Farah last ran in London in 2019, coming fifth, having finished third the year before.

"So it's been a little while," he said. "But I'll be preparing well, I'll head out to Ethiopia and put in a lot of solid training and see what I can do when it comes to April."

FOCUS

Warner fears for future of Test cricket

Reuters
Melbourne

Australia opener David Warner has expressed concern for the future of Test cricket, with emerging players focusing on "short term" interests as lucrative T20 leagues proliferate globally.

Warner, who has played 101 tests and more than 200 limited overs internationals, said he had tried to impress upon younger teammates, including Sydney Thunder talent Oliver Davies, the importance of the longest format.

"I was speaking to (Davies) the other day. He likes playing white-ball cricket, I can't see him playing red-ball cricket any time soon," Warner told reporters.

"If he wants to put his mind to it, he can definitely play."

"But I've got a little bit of scaredness about what's going to happen in the next five to 10 years, where cricket is actually heading."

"I'd love for guys coming through to play red-ball cricket and play Test cricket because that's the legacy that you should want to leave behind."



A number of top Australian cricketers have carved out lucrative careers on the global T20 circuit without playing tests, including Tim David, Chris Lynn and Marcus Stoinis.

Warner suggested they were the exception and that most players would be better off boosting their value in test cricket.

"There's only been a small minority of people who have been able to do that and have a long career (without Tests)," said the 36-year-old.

"Guys see the short term at the moment with all the leagues and stuff around."

"The best way to get value for your currency is actually making a name for yourself."

CRICKET

Sri Lanka's Hathurusingha returns as Bangladesh coach

AFP
Dhaka

Former Sri Lankan batsman Chandika Hathurusingha will return as head coach of the Bangladesh cricket team after a largely successful tenure with the side between 2014 and 2017, the Bangladesh Cricket Board said yesterday.

The 54-year-old Sri Lankan has reached a two-year term with the board that starts from February 2023, the BCB said in a statement.

"Chandika's experience and knowledge of Bangladesh cricket will be an advantage for him and will benefit the players," said BCB chief executive officer Nizam Uddin Chowdhury.

"He is a proven tactician and we have seen his impact on the national team during his first assignment."

Hathurusingha, who resigned as the assistant coach of Cricket New South Wales earlier yesterday, will replace South African Russell Domingo.

Domingo stepped down as the Bangladesh head coach in December, days after the side's

disappointing Test series defeat at home to India, with a year left on his contract.

"It's an honour to have been given this opportunity to coach the Bangladesh national team once again," a BCB statement quoted Hathurusingha as saying.

"I really loved the warmth of the people and the culture of Bangladesh whenever I have been there. I'm looking forward to working with the players once again and enjoy their successes," he said.

Hathurusingha helped Bangladesh reach the quarter-final in the World Cup 2015 and win one-day international series against Pakistan, India and South Africa during his previous stint as the Bangladesh head coach.

Bangladesh also recorded memorable Test wins against England, Australia and Sri Lanka during his first spell.

He resigned in November 2017 after a disappointing series in South Africa and took charge of his native Sri Lanka team.

His new tenure will begin with a series against England, who arrive in Bangladesh in late February to play three ODIs and as many Twenty20 internationals.



Indian groundsman replaced after 'shocker' T20 pitch

NEW DELHI: A cricket stadium in India has replaced its chief groundsman after players and pundits complained about a "shocker" pitch at a recent international against New Zealand, an official said yesterday.

The low-scoring T20 match saw India reach the modest target of 100 with one ball and six wickets to spare at Lucknow's Ekana stadium on Sunday. It witnessed 30 overs of spin without a single six being hit in either innings, a highly unusual tally in the normally big-hitting format of the sport where pace bowling is used heavily.

"To be honest, it was a shocker of a wicket," India skipper Hardik Pandya said.

"I don't mind difficult wickets. I am all up for that, but somewhere down the line the curators or the grounds that we are going to play in should make sure they prepare the pitches earlier," he said. Indian media reported that the chief groundsman Surinder, who goes by one name, was given the axe the next day.

But Udai Sinha, managing director of the body that oversees Ekana's sporting infrastructure, told AFP they have not fired anybody but confirmed that Surinder had been replaced by Sanjeev Agarwal. "We haven't taken anybody's job," Sinha said. "We have just brought in Sanjeev as the head curator to oversee the pitch preparation."

The match saw India level the three-match series at 1-1 with the decider in Ahmedabad today. "Let's be very honest, it was a sub-standard wicket and not a T20 wicket," cricketer-turned-commentator Gautam Gambhir said.

"You don't expect this kind of purchase from the spinners and it was tough," Gambhir said on Star Sports. Foreign teams visiting India frequently complain that the wickets prepared by ground staff often favour the home side's spinners. But New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner said after the Lucknow game only that the match was "definitely something different" and the pitch "challenging".

SPOTLIGHT

Leicestershire sign Rahane

AFP
London

Leicestershire have signed India's Ajinkya Rahane for part of the 2023 English domestic season, the Midlands county announced yesterday.

The 34-year-old, who has captained his country in all formats, will arrive at Grace Road in June and be available for eight first-class County Championship matches and all

of the One-Day Cup. Rahane has scored 4,931 runs, including 12 centuries, in 82 Tests and 2,962 runs in 90 one-day internationals, although it is just over a year since he last represented India. Leicestershire finished bottom in last season's Second Division of the County Championship without winning a match.

Rahane, who previously had a county stint with Hampshire in 2019 where he scored a century on debut against Nottinghamshire, said in a statement:

"I'm really happy to be joining Leicestershire for the upcoming season. I can't wait to play alongside my new teammates and explore the vibrant city of Leicester."

Leicestershire director of cricket Claude Henderson added: "He (Rahane) comes with a lot of experience and a tremendous work ethic. It's a great opportunity for us to tap into that."

Meanwhile Surrey have re-signed West Indies spinner Sunil Narine for the 2023 Blast.

FOCUS

Russian Olympic chief says athletes must compete without restrictions

AFP
Moscow

The head of Russia's Olympic Committee said yesterday that athletes representing Russia must not be subjected to different conditions from those of other countries, amid a growing row over their participation in the 2024 Paris Games.

"Russians must participate exactly on the same conditions as all other athletes. Any additional conditions or criteria are unwelcome, especially any that have political overtones, which are completely unacceptable for the Olympic movement," Stanislav Pozdnyakov said, according to Russian news agencies.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC)

said last week it was examining a "pathway" for Russians to take part in the summer Games next year, probably as neutral athletes rather than under their national flag. Russia and its ally Belarus, which allowed its territory to be a stage ground for the offensive, have been sidelined from most Olympic sports since Russian forces invaded Ukraine last February.

That announcement sparked an immediate backlash from Kyiv, with a Ukrainian presidential aide accusing the IOC of being a "promoter of war".

Ukraine has threatened to boycott the Paris Games if Russians are allowed to take part. Pozdnyakov said his organisation welcomed efforts by the IOC to allow Russian athletes to compete. "But as for additional

conditions, we strongly disagree. The Olympic Charter states that all athletes must participate on an equal footing," he added.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Russia's participation in the Paris Olympics would amount to showing that "terror can allegedly be something acceptable".

Zelensky also last week said he had invited IOC president Thomas Bach to visit the frontline Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, "so that he can see for himself that neutrality does not exist".

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Monday that of the 71 medals that Russian competitors won at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, 45 were won by athletes who were members of the Central Sports Club of the Russian Army, or CSKA. "The army that commits

atrocities, kills, rapes, and loots," Kuleba said. "This is whom the ignorant IOC wants to put under (the) white flag allowing (them) to compete."

The Olympic Council of Asia, however, last week offered Russian and Belarusian athletes the chance to compete in this year's Asian Games, arguing that "all athletes, regardless of their nationality or the passport they hold, should be able to compete in sports competitions".

That was a significant move because it would allow athletes from those two countries to achieve qualifying standards they would need to compete in the Paris Olympics.

The IOC reiterated last week that the international federations for each Olympic sport were "the sole authority for its international competitions".



Olympic rings are pictured in front of the IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland. (Reuters)

TENNIS

Challenges loom for WTA after Sabalenka's Australian triumph

Now World No 2 and boasting one of the most powerful games in women's tennis, she looms as a major threat to top-ranked Pole Iga Swiatek, who she beat at the WTA Finals



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka holds the Daphne Akhurst Memorial Cup following her win over Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina in the Australian Open final in Melbourne on Saturday. (AFP)

Reuters
Melbourne

Aryna Sabalenka's long-awaited confirmation as a Grand Slam champion and a corker of an Australian Open final were a welcome balm for the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) as the women's tour seeks to move on from a bruising loss of star power.

Challenges lie ahead, however, as the circuit negotiates a tricky geopolitical landscape and a scheduling impasse with the lucrative Chinese market.

After years of struggling with nerves on the biggest stage, 24-year-old Sabalenka's three-set win over Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina in the final at Melbourne Park gave the big-hitting Belarusian her first Grand Slam title. Now world number

two and boasting one of the most powerful games in women's tennis, she looms as a major threat to top-ranked Pole Iga Swiatek, who she beat at the WTA Finals.

The development of a proper rivalry between the pair would be a tonic for the WTA which has produced few of note in recent years and recently lost Serena Williams, a player that transcended the sport, to retirement.

Sabalenka's hopes of shaking up the women's game may be taken out of her hands at Wimbledon, however, if Russian and Belarusian players remain banned from the grasscourt Grand Slam. Sabalenka, along with all Russian and Belarusian players, missed Wimbledon last year after organisers controversially excluded them as a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which Moscow calls a "special operation".

With the conflict in Ukraine showing no sign of ending, a decision about Russian and Belarusian players competing at the All England Club is pressing.

The ban had other consequences that are still being felt today, with players who competed at Wimbledon unable to earn ranking points from the tournament after it was sanctioned by both the WTA and the men's ATP tour. The loss of points was a setback for some players, not least champion Rybakina, who would have had a much higher seeding than 22 at the Australian Open. The 23-year-old had to knock out Swiatek and two other Grand Slam champions in a tough draw at Melbourne Park to reach the final.

Her ranking has now jumped 15 places to 10th as a result of that run, which should help the Russia-born Kazakh's bid for a

second Grand Slam title to add to her Wimbledon trophy.

The Australian Open provided another reminder of the strength of Chinese women's tennis as Zhang Shuai and Zhu Lin reached the last 16 of the women's singles.

The Chinese men's game, long overshadowed by the success of the country's women, also showed promise as teenager Shang Juncheng became the first Chinese man to win a main draw match at the Australian Open in the professional era.

China's abandonment of its zero-Covid policy is expected to pave the way for the return of international tennis after a three-year hiatus, and the ATP has three events in the country listed in its 2023 calendar.

The WTA's schedule remains blank after the U.S. Open, however, with no clarity on tourna-

ments to be held in China pending a resolution to the Peng Shuai issue. Former world number one doubles player Peng accused a senior Chinese government official of sexual assault in 2021 in a post on social media that was soon removed from the country's internet.

She later denied having made the accusation.

The WTA has called for a formal investigation into Peng's allegations and wants to meet with her privately to discuss her situation, a spokesperson told Reuters this month.

With China having hosted nine WTA events in 2019, including the season-ending WTA Finals in Shenzhen, the women's circuit has suffered without the Asian powerhouse's participation in recent years and has plenty more to lose if the stand-off continues.

SPOTLIGHT

Zverev hails 'justice' as ATP finds 'insufficient evidence' of domestic abuse

AFP
London

Alexander Zverev said "justice has prevailed" after tennis chiefs announced yesterday there was "insufficient evidence" to substantiate allegations of domestic abuse against the German former world number two.

The 25-year-old became the subject of an ATP-commissioned probe in October 2021 following allegations made by his former girlfriend, Olya Sharypova.

But the ATP, which runs the men's tour, said the results of the investigation meant it would not be taking disciplinary action.

Zverev, whose 2022 season ended when he tore ankle ligaments at the French Open, said he had denied the "baseless allegations" from the start and would now focus on his career.

"This decision marks a third, neutral, third-party arbitrator who has reviewed all relevant information and made a clear and informed decision on this matter in my favour," he said in a statement.

"In addition to the ATP's independent investigation, I have also initiated court proceedings in Germany and Russia, both of which I have won."

Zverev, who reached the second round of the recent Australian Open, has slipped to 14th in the world rankings after his injury problems. "I am grateful that this is finally resolved and my priority now is recovering from injury and concentrating on what I love most in this world - tennis."

The ATP said earlier that the investigation had been com-



pleted. "A major independent investigation into Alexander Zverev has found insufficient evidence to substantiate published allegations of abuse," it said.

The ATP said while the primary focus of the probe related to alleged abuses at the ATP Masters 1000 event in Shanghai in 2019, its scope also included possible misconduct in other locations, including Monaco, New York and Geneva, as referenced in public reporting.

An inquiry led by the Lake Forest Group (LFG), a third-party investigator, conducted "extensive interviews" with Sharypova, Zverev and 24 others. It also reviewed submissions by both Sharypova and Zverev, including text messages, audio files and photos.

Following a 15-month process, LFG submitted its full report to the ATP, which said that "based on a lack of reliable evidence and eyewitness reports, in addition to conflicting statements by Sharypova, Zverev and other interviewees, the investigation was unable to substantiate the allegations of abuse" or determine that violations of the ATP's rules had taken place. The statement added the findings "may however be re-evaluated should new evidence come to light, or should any legal proceedings reveal violations of ATP rules".

Haas first F1 team to reveal new look for 2023

Haas became the first Formula One team to show off their new look for 2023 yesterday with growing optimism for the season ahead and US-based MoneyGram now prominent as the title sponsor. The online reveal of digital renders showed the Ferrari-powered car in a freshened up red, black and white colour scheme. "It's great that we're first out of the gate to showcase our livery but our attention is firmly on getting the VF-23 on-track and preparing for the season ahead," said team boss Guenther Steiner. "We really have something to build on following last year's performances."

The new car will run for the first time at Silverstone on February 11 before testing in Bahrain from February 23-25. The season then starts at the Sakhir circuit on March 5.

Haas finished eighth out of the 10 teams in 2022 after occupying last place in 2021. They have a new driver pairing with Denmark's Kevin Magnussen staying but German veteran Nico Hulkenberg replacing young compatriot Mick Schumacher. Magnussen provided a highlight of the team's 2022 season with a surprise pole position in the Brazilian Grand Prix.

"We head into a new season buoyed by some strong team performances last year and a return to points paying finishes," said owner Gene Haas. "The aim for the 2023 season is naturally to do that more consistently and with Kevin Magnussen and Nico Hulkenberg I certainly believe we've got an experienced driver pairing more than capable of delivering those points on a Sunday." The team announced a multi-year deal for payments and money transfer company MoneyGram International Inc. to be their title sponsor last October. The team's previous two title sponsorships ended prematurely, a deal with drink brand Rich Energy terminated after just 14 races in 2019 and Russian Potash producer Uralkali dropped last year following the invasion of Ukraine. The arrival of MoneyGram, active in 200 countries, starts a new era for the team. "I think things have evolved in a very positive way. The energy around the team is incredibly vibrant, they are very, very excited and fired up," MoneyGram's chief executive Alex Holmes told Reuters.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN SETS GRAND SLAM ATTENDANCE RECORD

The Australian Open set a Grand Slam attendance record with more than 900,000 spectators visiting over three weeks, organisers said yesterday, despite the absence of some big-name players and schedule disruptions due to rain.

A record 839,192 fans flocked to Melbourne Park from Jan. 16-29 for the first tournament in two years free of Covid-19 restrictions, beating the previous mark of 812,174 set in January 2020.

The figures eclipse last year's attendance

numbers at other Grand Slam main draws - 515,164 visited Wimbledon, 613,500 were at the French Open and 776,120 went to the U.S. Open.

Over 60,000 also watched the qualifying events in Melbourne, bringing the total up to 902,312.

The tournament, missing the retired Serena Williams, Roger Federer and last year's homegrown champion Ash Barty, broke its single-day attendance mark with 94,854 fans visiting on Jan 21. The previ-

ous record was 93,709 set in 2020.

"It was reported that we didn't have the greats any more, that it was going to be terrible. But people just want to be entertained," Tennis Australia chief executive Craig Tiley told the Melbourne Age.

"They want to have some fun, and tennis is a great option for them, and it's become a summer thing to do for Melburnians and for Australians and also for our guests from around the world."

Tiley has set his sights on breaching the

one million mark next year.

"This year was the start of it," Tiley said. "It's going to be a three-week extravaganza."

Novak Djokovic beat Stefanos Tsitsipas on Sunday to win his 10th Australian Open crown, drawing level with Rafa Nadal on 22 majors, and reclaim the world number one ranking.

Aryna Sabalenka won her first Grand Slam title with victory over Elena Rybakina on Saturday.

LIGUE 1

'Mbappe, Neymar and Messi in same team not hindering PSG'

Galtier says the three stars are not having negative impact on team's balance

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Christophe Galtier has denied that playing Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappe and Neymar all together in the same side has a negative impact on the team's balance, as the Brazilian was ruled out of today's match at Montpellier.

PSG said Neymar is suffering from muscle fatigue and received treatment as he sat out training yesterday while the rest of his teammates prepared for the trip south following Sunday's 1-1 draw at home to Reims in Ligue 1. Neymar scored the opening goal against Reims but PSG conceded an equaliser deep into stoppage time as their lead over second-placed Lens remained three points.

PSG have won just one of four league games this month but Galtier rejected suggestions the presence of Neymar, Mbappe and Messi was hurting the team's stability. "We have at PSG three incredibly strong attacking players - Kylian, Leo and Ney, with 55 goals and 34 assists since the start of the season," Galtier said. "To say that we have to leave one of them out to be balanced is a mistake. We've been able to play well and be solid with all of three of them."

PSG face a run of six games in 19 days including the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie against Bayern Munich on February 14. "January hasn't been good and everyone needs to have it in their heads that February will be better. I have spoken to the squad, we need to get some consistency back in our performances but there are times in a season where it's more difficult," added Galtier.

PSG will also be without midfielder Marco Verratti, who is suspended after picking up a straight red card on Sunday just 14 minutes after coming on as a second-half substitute. "We have to re-discover the right formula in midfield. We need more density and more fluidity," Galtier explained. "We need more rigour and (must) make more efforts collectively. We used to do this in the first months



Paris Saint-Germain's Kylian Mbappe (centre) vies for the ball with Marco Verratti (right) and Lionel Messi (second left) during a training session at the club's Camp des Loges ground in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, west of Paris, yesterday. (AFP)

of the season. Everyone needs to look into their own performances and what they are doing for the team."

He confirmed the club was in talks to sign Moroccan winger Hakim Ziyech from Chelsea but said no deal had yet been completed. "We will comment on the transfer window when it is closed," said Galtier. "As for whether one, two or three players might come in, based on what I have read, the club is working hard... but

I'm not going to comment on potential arrivals or departures. If there are no arrivals, there are no arrivals."

The two clubs remain in talks, with the Moroccan international having been identified by PSG as Pablo Sarabia's replacement after the Spanish midfielder's departure for Wolves earlier this month.

Ziyech, who is short of game time in West London, has directly intervened in the negotiations, having told the Chelsea management to be more flexible with their terms.

The former Ajax man has made just short of a century of appearances for the Blues since his arrival in 2020, but has only featured ten times in the Premier League this season and is yet to find the net.

Ziyech emerged as an option in the wake of PSG's attempts to sign Lyon midfielder prospect Rayan Cherki, with ex-Bordeaux winger Malcom was also a target.

AFC Congress to be held in Bahrain today

Manama: All eyes will be on Manama, Bahrain, for the 33rd Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Congress today where the AFC Executive Committee for the term 2023 to 2027 as well as the Continent's representatives to the FIFA Council will be confirmed.

Set against the backdrop of the immaculate Gulf Convention Centre in Manama, the Congress will see incumbent President Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim al-Khalifa run unopposed for the AFC Presidency.

As the AFC's highest decision-making body, the Congress will elect members of the key AFC Executive Committee and FIFA Council positions.

At the same time, the AFC Congress is also expected to deliberate on the host of the AFC Asian Cup 2027, where the focus will be on the Saudi Arabian Football Federation who remain the sole bidder for the hosting rights of the 19th

edition of Asia's crown jewel.

Representatives from the AFC's Member and Regional Associations will be gathering physically for the first time since the AFC Extraordinary Congress in Paris in June 2019 along with FIFA President Gianni Infantino who is expected to address the Congress alongside the AFC President.

In addition to the key decisions, those in attendance and members of the media will also hear from the AFC President on the undeniable progress of Asian football, most notably the inspiring performances of the continent's teams at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 where a record three Asian sides qualified to the Round of 16 for the first time.

Similarly, the length and breadth of the AFC's programmes and initiatives to uplift the standards of the Asian game will be outlined during the AFC President's address to the Congress.

FOCUS

Manchester United's Eriksen sidelined for 'extended period'

Reuters
Manchester

Manchester United midfielder Christian Eriksen has been ruled out for up to three months with an ankle injury, dealing a significant blow to the Premier League club's hopes for the remainder of the season.

The Denmark player, 30, had to come off in United's 3-1 win over Reading on Saturday in the FA Cup fourth round following a foul by Andy Carroll and a statement from the club yesterday said he was "likely to be out until late April or early May".

That means he will miss the start of Denmark's European Championship qualifying campaign with matches at home to Finland and away to Kazakhstan in Group H in late March.

Eriksen, who needed life-saving treatment on the pitch in June 2021 after suffering a near-fatal cardiac arrest in a European Championship match against the

Finns, has been instrumental in United's impressive form this term. He has played 31 of United's 32 matches in all competitions this season, scoring two goals and providing nine assists.

The midfielder joined United last year after leaving fellow Premier League side Brentford, where he had re-established his career on a short-term deal after his heart problems.

"We are disappointed about it but it happens in top football," United manager Erik ten Hag said. "We have to deal with it. We have good players in the midfield department but I think we can never fill that because every player has his own characteristics. Christian Eriksen brings top quality and especially in some specifics that is hard to replace. His impact in the final third."

Speaking ahead of today's League Cup semi-final, second leg at home to Nottingham Forest, Ten Hag said it would be difficult to sign a replacement on transfer deadline day. United are 3-0 up from the first leg.



Manchester United's Christian Eriksen (left) was injured following a foul from Reading's Andy Carroll during the FA Cup fourth round match in Manchester on Saturday. (Reuters)

Spanish court reinstates ban on UEFA punishing Super League clubs

Madrid: A Spanish court yesterday barred UEFA and FIFA from punishing the promoters of the European Super League following an appeal against an earlier decision. The ruling is the latest step in a drawn-out legal battle which had already been through two other Spanish courts and could in turn be superseded by a ruling from the European Union Court of Justice, expected in the first quarter of this year.

The decision was in response to an appeal by the league's promoters. The Madrid Provincial Court agreed to overturn a decision by a judge in a commercial court in April to uphold UEFA's earlier appeal against precautionary measures

issued by another Spanish court shortly after the failed launch of the breakaway competition in 2021.

The magistrates reinstated the temporary prohibitions against the governing bodies of European and world football, saying that "it does not seem to us that the mode of conduct of the defendants (UEFA and FIFA) can be justified as protection of the general interests of European soccer."

"What we notice is an action that meets all the characteristics of an unjustifiable abuse by whoever holds a position of dominance," their decision said. The Spanish ruling prevents UEFA and FIFA from taking action against the

Super League pending the ruling from the European court on whether the governing body of European football abused its dominant position in trying to block the plan. In December, in a possible indication of how the European court will rule, its top legal advisor published a non-binding opinion saying football's governing bodies acted within their rights when they threatened to expel clubs or players who joined the proposed semi-closed league Super League.

The Super League was launched in 2021 by 12 of Europe's biggest clubs, but Premier League clubs swiftly pulled out following a backlash from fans and the British government and only Real Madrid,

Barcelona and Juventus remain public supporters of the project.

A22, a company founded earlier this year which has taken on the role of defending and promoting the Super League, welcomed the court ruling which its CEO Bernd Reichart said allowed it to "freely continue with the project of creating a new and exciting European soccer competition".

The Spanish Liga also responded saying it "accepts this precautionary pronouncement but is awaiting the resolution of the main proceedings in the Commercial Court of Madrid once the judgement of the Court of Justice of the European Union is known."

TRANSFER

Bayern sign Man City's Cancelo on loan

Reuters
Berlin

Bayern Munich have signed full back Joao Cancelo on an initial loan deal from Manchester City for the rest of the season with an option to buy the Portuguese international, the Bundesliga club said yesterday.

His arrival completes a trio of winter signings for Bayern, who face Paris St Germain in the Champions League last 16 in two weeks, with keeper Yann Sommer and defender Daley Blind. They were brought in to replace long-term injured goalkeeper Manuel Neuer and defenders Lucas Hernandez and Noussair Mazraoui.

Cancelo made 16 league starts for City this season but has not played for the club since their derby loss to Manchester United earlier this month, missing the last three games. He started only three of 10 games after the World Cup break and lost his place to Nathan Ake while 18-year-old Rico Lewis also emerged as an option for manager Pep Guardiola this season.

"My decision had to do with the playing time that had been little in recent weeks," the Portuguese told a news conference. "There was speculation that my relationship with (Manchester City coach) Pep (Guardiola) was not the best but fact is I wanted to play



more. I wanted to start this new adventure as soon as possible," Cancelo added.

"I enjoyed my time at City and I am still under contract with the club so I don't see it as a final departure. I will now focus only on my five months and see what happens then."

Cancelo had been instrumental for City since his arrival in 2019, winning two league titles, while he was also named in the Premier League Team of the Year in the past two seasons. The versatile 28-year-old has predominantly played as a left back but can also operate on the right flank.

"We've signed him on loan now and have the possibility of signing him permanently

in the summer," said Bayern's sports director Hasan Salihamidzic. "Joao is a player we've been thinking about for a while now because we very much appreciate his qualities. He's the optimal fit in our system with his attacking style of play and dynamism, and his mentality and experience fit very well in our team. We have now brought in Sommer, Daley Blind and Joao. We covered those three positions and hope to have the depth in our squad needed to reach our goals."

Bayern top the Bundesliga but have failed to win since the restart after the World Cup. They have had three straight draws and their lead over Union Berlin has been cut to a point.

MANE RETURNS TO TRAINING WITH BALL IN MUNICH

Bayern Munich forward Sadio Mane trained with the ball for the first time in three months yesterday, two weeks ahead of the club's crucial Paris Saint Germain clash. Mane, 30, took part in the session, one week after his return to the training pitch.

Mane injured a tendon in his leg during his side's 6-1 win over Werder Bremen in November and required surgery that forced him to miss Senegal's World Cup campaign in Qatar. Bayern travel to Paris for the first leg of the Champions League last 16 tie on February 14, with the return fixture in Munich on March 8.

SPOTLIGHT

Real expected to continue European dominance of Club World Cup

AFP
Rabat

One of the last Club World Cups in its current format begins today in Morocco, where Real Madrid will be favourites to continue Europe's dominance of the much-maligned FIFA competition. FIFA president Gianni Infantino announced on the sidelines of the World Cup in Qatar that an expanded Club World Cup is planned from 2025.

The bigger competition, which would feature 32 teams, has been a controversial pet project of Infantino's for some time. A 24-team Club World Cup, involving eight European sides, had been due to take place in China in 2021 only to be put on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic.

World football's governing body is yet to reveal any further details of the plans, but global players' union FIFPro has already complained of Infantino making the announcement "unilaterally

without seriously consulting... with the players".

For now, the Club World Cup limps on with just seven teams, including the six continental champions. After five consecutive editions in the Middle East it returns to Morocco, which hosted the tournament in 2013 and 2014, and Real will be expected to become the 10th consecutive European winners.

Real, the reigning European champions, have claimed the title four times, including in Morocco in 2014. Real will enter in the semi-finals on February 8 and will play in Rabat against either CONCACAF champions Seattle Sounders, Egyptian giants Al Ahly or New Zealand's Auckland City, the champions of Oceania. If they win, Carlo Ancelotti's side will advance to the final on February 11.

The other semi-final will see last year's Copa Libertadores winners Flamengo take on either Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia or home hopes Wydad Casablanca. Widely dismissed as an irrelevance in

Europe, the competition is considered far more prestigious in the rest of the world, a chance for their best sides to pit themselves against giants like Real.

Brazilian clubs have won the Club World Cup four times, most recently through Corinthians in 2012. Wydad will be hoping to become the first African club to triumph. The host nation is always represented, but Wydad also won last year's CAF Champions League, and so Al Ahly - the team they beat in the final - have been invited to take part as well.

Walid Regragui led Wydad to that continental title before taking Morocco on a historic run to the World Cup semi-finals in Qatar. "It's nice for Morocco - particularly after the World Cup we had - for people to see that there's football here, there are fans, and there are beautiful stadiums. It's going to be fantastic for our country," Regragui said.

Today, Al Ahly - the record 10-time African champions who have finished third at the last two Club World Cups - play Auckland.