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Alcaraz returns to Miami after rapid rise



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Evenepoel shows his 'good legs' and clean heels to Roglic



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CRICKET

Zampa bowls Australia to ODI series victory over India

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FOOTBALL

Al Duhail, Al Sadd ready for Ooredoo Cup semi showdown

OUR GOAL IS TO WIN THE CUP, SAYS SADD COACH JUAN MANUEL LILLO 'JUANMA'



Al Duhail coach Hernan Crespo with his players during a training session yesterday.



Al Sadd coach Juan Manuel Lillo "Juanma"

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Rival coaches Hernan Crespo of Al Duhail and Juan Manuel Lillo "Juanma" of Al Sadd both exuded confidence ahead of the Ooredoo Cup semi-final clash at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium today at 9.45pm. Speaking to the media ahead of the knock-out clash, Al Duhail's Argentinian coach said, "This is a tournament in which all clubs participate and our presence in the semi-final means that we have worked hard and succeeded in achieving the victories that have brought us here. And, as I have always said earlier, Al Duhail enter every tournament with the aim of winning the title. "Our matches with Al Sadd

are always exciting and strong. Like our last match against them where we managed to come back at the last minute. Such matches require that all players be at the top of their focus throughout the match," he added.

He pointed out that everyone is ready except for the known absences due to injuries - Edmilson Junior, Asim Madibo and Sultan al-Breik - while the other players are ready for the match.

Crespo stressed: "Victory in football provides the players with additional energy to continue achieving positive results and certainly our presence at the top of the QNB Stars League requires us to show the personality of a champion and show the true strength of the team."

For his part, Al Duhail goal-

keeper Shihab al-Laithi, said: "I am confident in the team's ability to achieve a positive result and we will work to win and qualify for the final.

"It will certainly be an enjoyable match for the fans, and a challenging one for both teams who know each other well given the many confrontations that have brought them together in the recent period, and we will work with all force to achieve victory."

He added: "Since the start of the season, the team has been suffering from absences and we went through the first rounds of the league without our international players. During the season many injuries occurred that made us lose a large number of players but everyone is ready now and eager to win a place in the coach's playing squad. "Our weapon is our desire

to win the championship title which will give us motivation to implement the directives of the technical staff and work to achieve victory."

Regarding the preparations for this match, al-Laithi said: "Our preparations have been normal and the way we have been working with since the beginning of the season but the difference in this match is that we know that it is a knock-out and there would be only one team that qualifies for the final.

"Al Duhail fans have a great role with the team and their presence inside the stadium will certainly give us additional strength to achieve the required result."

Al Sadd coach Juan Manuel Lillo "Juanma" said they faced a difficult challenge but their aim is to win the Ooredoo Cup.

He said: "Every match has its own challenge and this tournament is completely different, and now we will play without

some of our international players. "Of course, our goal is to win the Ooredoo Cup and we are very excited about the opportunity to reach the final due to the great efforts made by the young players before the World Cup. Reaching the final will be a great achievement for us, especially for this group of young players."

For his part, Boualem Khoukhi, Al Sadd defender said, "Ooredoo Cup is different from the league and the semi-final will have only one winner and our goal will be to be in the final."

He added: "We are suffering from some absences as some of our players are with their national teams and also with the Olympic (U23) team, but we will work to do our best to win."

AL ARABI WELL PREPARED TO FACE UMM SALAL, SAYS COACH

Al Arabi coach Younes Ali said his team's preparations have been good and that they were ready to face Umm Salal in the Ooredoo Cup semi-final but they will need to be fully focused to ensure a final berth. The two teams will meet in the last four clash at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium today at 9.45pm. Speaking to the media on the pre-match eve, Ali said, "Umm Salal are an organised team which includes distinguished players and also seeks to win and reach the final. While Al Arabi will have absences with some of our international players joining their national teams and some players nursing injuries but we have a wonderful group of players and are ready for the next match. We look forward to achieving victory and reaching the final." He added: "Qualifying for the



Al Arabi coach Younes Ali

final requires full concentration and throughout the 90 minutes as these are knock-out matches where a loss means exit. Whoever is more focused will achieve victory and make the final. "We think about each match separately and Ooredoo Cup confrontations are different from the league. We will strive to reach the final but we have a

difficult competitor and we will need to do our best to win," he concluded. Meanwhile Al Arabi player Mohamed Salal Elneel stressed on the difficulty of the match against Umm Salal.

"We certainly respect the ambitions of Umm Salal and I do not think that our task will be easy regardless of the competitor's position on the league rankings table which is not a measure for evaluating their performance because all teams face Al Arabi with greater focus and there is no easy match in football," he said. "The match will be a good opportunity for some players (who did not play much in the league) to play in an important match such as the semi-finals of the Ooredoo Cup and help the team to reach the final," he stressed.



Umm Salal coach Talal El Karkouri

No room for mistakes: Umm Salal coach El Karkouri Umm Salal coach Talal El Karkouri said his team has no room for mistakes in the semi-final against Al Arabi. He said: "The match will be strong and difficult, because the opponents are a team with great potential in addition to the availability of the best foreign and local professionals, as well as

distinguished substitutes. "It will be a big match because each team seeks to win, reach the final and win the cup. There's no room for mistakes and the team that is better, more focused, exploits opportunities and makes fewer mistakes will win."

He added: "We must play the match with great focus and we will work to take advantage of all opportunities to translate it into our favour. We will also develop the appropriate squad and plan with which we will face The Dream Team.

"All the players of the team realise the importance of the match, in addition to their desire to win and reach the final, because it is a good opportunity, and we must enter with strength and focus in order to achieve what is required and reach the final," said El Karkouri.

MOTOGP

Bagnaia ready to start fast as healthy Marquez frets

AFP
Paris

Even before the MotoGP season opens in Portugal on Sunday, defending world champion Francesco Bagnaia appears to hold pole position.

Six-time champion Marc Marquez might be back to full fitness, as his Honda team insist, but pre-season testing suggested Bagnaia is again the fastest rider on the fastest bike and is poised to continue the domination he established late last season.

Bagnaia was fastest in the last pre-season tests in Portimao in March on the track where the season starts.

"I'm very happy," Bagnaia said after smashing the track record. "We are ready at 100 percent for first race."

The Italian failed to finish five races last season and at the half-way point, after crashing on lap three in Germany, trailed the 2021 champion Fabio Quartararo by 91 points.

Bagnaia accelerated through the field on his Ducati, winning the next four races.

He crashed again in Japan, but also collected another win and three podium finishes in the last six races. Quartararo's Yamaha could not keep up.

Former teammate Jack Miller, now at KTM, was impressed by the impact of the first title on Bagnaia.

"This year he seems more of a changed man, a confident man, and he's riding pretty impressive," said the Australian.

In the final testing, only Quartararo, who found some pace on the last day and was third quickest, broke Ducati's domination of the top eight. Bagnaia acknowledged teams did not show all their cards in testing but said: "It looks like we have more advantage than last year."

Ducati's edge suggests Bagnaia's main rival may come from across his own garage.

Fellow Italian Enea Bastianini, who finished third last season for Ducati's satellite team Gresini, has moved up to the factory team. The pair traded bars last season, but this winter gave a jokey joint interview to the MotoGP website.

"The battle between us will be

intense, but we have to be intelligent and respectful to have a good relationship," Bagnaia said. Bastianini said he would not back down.

"The big difference is Pecco is MotoGP world champion and me, no!" he said.

"He's the fastest rider in the world. It is a pleasure to battle, to fight with him this year, and to try to win."

The dynamic will also be interesting at Honda.

Marquez, who has suffered three seasons ruined by injury and surgery, is "now back to full fitness", according to Honda.

As he tries to recapture the form that brought him six titles, Honda have signed another former world champion, fellow Spaniard Joan Mir.

Mir edged Marquez on the final day of testing, but the two Hondas were only 13th and 14th.

"Unfortunately, some of the things that Honda expected would work on track was not working like we expected," Marquez said.

"If tomorrow was the race with the conditions we had on track we can fight for fifth to 10th, I believe."

Marquez was also unhappy with continued innovations.

In Portimao, Aprilia unveiled bikes with wings on the front fork among a series of aerodynamic additions.

Yamaha then introduced a wing sticking up from the bike's tail, looking as if it had been borrowed from a Formula One car.

One purpose of such additions is to roil the air for bikes behind. Marquez, the master of the unforeseen overtake, does not like it.

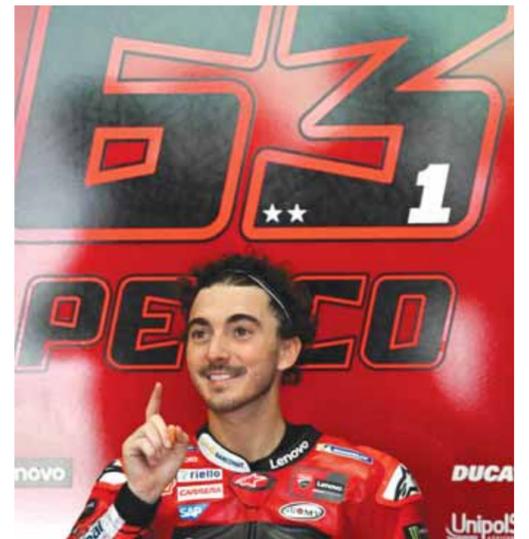
"It's getting more and more difficult to follow riders," he said. "For the show, I feel it's not the best way."

Despite offering more overtaking and more crashes, that show is falling behind F1 in the race for viewers.

Filming for Amazon's documentary series, MotoGP Unlimited, has been stopped, although a separate series on Marquez is planned.

MotoGP is trying to emulate F1 by adding a half-length, half points, sprint race. Unlike F1, it will be sprinting every Saturday.

It will give the Ducatis two chances to win each weekend.



In this file photo taken on February 10, 2023, Ducati Lenovo's Italian rider Francesco Bagnaia gestures inside his team garage during the first day of the pre-season MotoGP winter test at Sepang International Circuit in Sepang. (AFP)

CRICKET

Zampa sparkles as Australia bag ODI series against India

The visitors clinch the three-match series 2-1 with a fighting win in Chennai



Australia's players celebrate after winning the third one-day international (ODI) against India at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Chennai

Leg-spinner Adam Zampa took four wickets as Australia beat India by 21 runs to clinch the three-match one-day international series 2-1 yesterday.

Electing to bat, Australia could not capitalise on a strong start and were bowled out for 269 in 49 overs on a slow track at the MA Chidambaram Stadium.

Their bowlers, led by Zampa, did an excellent job defending the total and bowled out India for 248 in 49.1 overs as Australia exacted a modicum of revenge after losing the four-test series 2-1.

"It's been an enjoyable tour," said Steve Smith, leading Australia in the absence of Pat Cummins who stayed in Sydney to be with his mother who died this month.

"The spinners bowled beautifully, really good performance."

Zampa was adjudged player-of-the-match but fellow spinner Ashton Agar turned the game on its head by removing Virat Kohli, whose 54 was the highest score by a batsman from either side, and Suryakumar Yadav in successive deliveries.

For the hosts, Hardik Pandya claimed



India's Virat Kohli plays a shot during the third one-day international (ODI) against Australia in Chennai yesterday. (AFP)

bowling figures of 3-44 and made a run-a-ball 40 but it was not enough to avoid India's first series loss on home soil since Aaron Finch's Australia beat them in 2019.

Australia recalled fit-again David Warner but the in-form Mitchell Marsh combined with Travis Head at the top of their batting order to give the touring side another blazing start.

Australia raced to 68 for no loss and Head, who made 33, got a reprieve after Shubman Gill dropped him at deep square leg. Pandya removed Head, Smith, and Marsh (47) to peg back Australia.

Batting at number four, Warner made 23 before Kuldeep Yadav wrecked Australia's middle order.

The left-arm unorthodox spinner dismissed Warner, Marnus Labuschagne and Alex Carey (38) but Australia's lower order provided crucial runs even though they could not last their full quota of 50 overs.

India also began briskly with Rohit Sharma (30) and Gill (37) playing a few attractive shots.

Kohli tried to forge partnerships with KL Rahul (32) and with Pandya but he looked tired by the end.

Zampa effectively decided the match by removing Pandya. India held back

Suryakumar, who came in at number seven, promoting Axar Patel as the pinch-hitter but neither play worked.

Patel was run out for two and Suryakumar fell for a first-ball duck for the third time in a row.

Rohit rued the lack of big partnerships in the Indian innings.

"You are born and brought up on these wickets. Sometimes you need to apply yourself and give yourself a chance," the opener said.

Marsh won the player-of-the-series award for his 194 runs from three innings. He said: "It is just natural aggression when I'm batting. Growing up at the WACA, I have thoroughly enjoyed it. I was really glad that I could come in and perform. I'm coming off an extended break. Sometimes in international cricket, you need time to do that. I have come fresh, and provided energy"

BRIEF SCORES

Australia 269 all out in 49 overs (M. Marsh 47, A. Carey 38; H. Pandya 3-44, K. Yadav 3-56) **beat India 248 all out in 49.1 overs** (V. Kohli 54, H. Pandya 40; A. Zampa 4-45, A. Agar 2-41)

Result: Australia won by 21 runs
Toss: Australia
Series: Australia won series 2-1

CYCLING

Evenepoel shows his 'good legs' and clean heels to Roglic

AFP
La Molina, Spain

Remco Evenepoel out-sprinted Primoz Roglic in the final drag to the peak at La Molina yesterday to win the third stage of the Tour of Catalunya but the Slovenian clung to the overall lead.

When Evenepoel, a Belgian who rides for Soudal-Quick Step, surged away from the pack with a few hundred metres (yards) to go, only Roglic, of Jumbo-Visma, was able to respond.

Evenepoel pulled clear on a final uphill bend to win by two seconds at the end of a mountainous 180.6km ride from Olost. "I had super good legs," he told broadcaster Eurosport. "I really felt I was getting better and better and better every day."

Evenepoel claimed a 10-second victory bonus, while Roglic gained six seconds for finishing second. That left the two men tied on 12 hours 42 minutes and 17 seconds.

Roglic kept the leader's jersey. He has two second places and a win in the three stages. Evenepoel had a third and a second before yesterday's win.

"I show already for a few days I'm pretty fast," said Evenepoel, who was wearing the white jersey of the best young rider in the race rather than his rainbow jersey as world champion.

"It's a pity I have the young jersey because I would like to have victory in the rainbow with my memories."

He said his Soudal team had set out to put pressure on their rivals from the penultimate climb, to 1,890m on Col de La Creueta, which race organisers ranked as harder than the finish.



"We saw the climb before La Molina was a tough one and a long one and we went close to 2,000m," he said.

"We wanted to make it as hard as possible from that climb on. It paid off."

Giulio Ciccone led the pack home and remains third at 19 seconds. Mikel Landa and Joao Almeida are next, already 44 seconds behind the two leaders.

"They were just on another level today," said Almeida.

"I think nobody could follow. Everyone was just playing for third place."

The race is serving as an appetiser for the Giro d'Italia, starting on May 6.

While today's 188.2km stage from Llivia to Sabadell gets its one big climb out of the way early and then heads steadily downhill, stage five on Friday ends with a ferocious climb up Lo Port, a cliff-girded hill just outside Barcelona.

"Expect a nice battle," said Evenepoel.

"We should save our energy tomorrow."

On another bad day for Ineos, former Tour de France winners Egan Bernal and Geraint Thomas were again dropped and finished more than 10 minutes adrift.

Qatar Universities Handball League ends

Doha: The first edition of the Qatar Universities Handball League 2023 for men organised by the Qatar Collegiate Sports Federation (QCSF) from 12th to 22nd March was concluded at the Qatar University's new sport Arena yesterday.

In the event's final day, Police Institute team claimed the first place and gold medals, University of Doha for Science and Technology won the runner-up place and silver medals as the

third place and bronze medals went to Qatar University. At the medal ceremony, the QCSF President, HE Dr Ibrahim bin Saleh al-Naimi crowned the top three winners. The closing scene of Universities Handball League 2023 was also attended by senior officials and board members of the Qatar Collegiate Sports Federation (QCSF), along with representatives of Universities, participating teams and students.



Players of Police Institute celebrate winning the gold medal in the Qatar Universities Handball League.

BOTTOMLINE

Japan's Ohtani strikes out Trout to seal World Baseball Classic victory

Reuters
Miami

Shohei Ohtani struck out Mike Trout in a showdown between two of the game's best players to seal Japan's 3-2 victory over the United States in a riveting World Baseball Classic (WBC) final at Miami's LoanDepot Park on Tuesday.

Baseball is the United States' national pastime but Japan's win over the defending WBC champions means they have won three of five editions of the global showcase.

They were a perfect 7-0 through this year's edition.

The contest ended in a duel that is likely to go down in baseball folklore as Ohtani, the hitting and pitching sensation from Japan, faced off against his Los Angeles Angels teammate and US captain Trout.

"Whether I got him out or he got a hit off of me, I didn't want to have any regrets," said Ohtani

through an interpreter. "I wanted to make my best pitch."

"This is a different experience, representing your country and facing guys representing their country. It was a different intensity and it was great."

Carrying their nation's flags, the two men had led their respective teams onto the field and then at the climax, in a moment of pure sporting magic, stood across from each other with everything on the line.

With Japan clinging to a 3-2 ninth inning lead they turned to their ace Ohtani.

He walked the first batter he faced in Jeff McNeil but then got Mookie Betts to hit into a double play, bringing up Trout with two out and the sellout crowd on its feet.

Throwing 100mph fastballs Ohtani struck out his Angels teammate on six pitches to trigger celebrations as the Japan team poured out of the dugout.

OHTANI THE 'UNICORN'
Japan manager Hideki Kuriyama

said the win could have a big impact on the sport's popularity back home.

"... all the kids in Japan who are watching that might think, 'Oh, that's really cool,' and they might want to make up their mind to want to be baseball players."

US manager Mark DeRosa said it had been a storybook ending for the baseball world but that he had hoped "it would end a little bit different with Mike popping one".

"The whole world got to see Ohtani come in, big spot, battling. It's kind of how it was kind of scripted," he told reporters after the game.

He also heaped praise on Ohtani, saying, "no moment's too big for him".

"What he's doing in the game is what probably 90% of the guys in that clubhouse did in Little League or in youth tournaments, and he's able to pull it off on the biggest stages. He is a unicorn to the sport!"

Ohtani was named the WBC's Most Valuable Player after post-



Japan designated hitter and closing pitcher Shohei Ohtani (16) and team Japan celebrate with the World Baseball Classic trophy after defeating the USA in the World Baseball Classic at LoanDepot Park. (USA TODAY Sports)

ing the best statistics over the entire tournament.

US shortstop Trea Turner provided the early fireworks with a second inning solo shot, taking Shota Imanaga into the left field

bleachers for his fifth home run of the WBC to give the US a 1-0 lead.

FOCUS

Alcaraz returns to Miami after meteoric rise

AFP
Miami Gardens

World number one Carlos Alcaraz heads into this week's Miami Open looking to defend both his title and top ranking and admitting even he has been surprised by his dizzying rise to the top of the sport.

A year ago, the 19-year-old came to Miami on the back of wins on clay in Croatia and Brazil and hoping to make his mark on the hard courts. His victory in South Florida launched a remarkable year.

The highlight was his US Open triumph which made him the youngest player to become world number one and he returns to Miami after last week's win in Indian Wells, achieved without dropping a set in the tournament.

"It's all been very fast, when I got to Miami last year I was around number 20 and a year later I am coming in with the

number one ranking. That is something very special. I fulfilled my dreams quicker than I expected," he told reporters.

Because of his victory in Miami last year, Alcaraz must win at the Florida event again if he is to hold on to his number one spot, but he says he feels no pressure in that regard or to meet newly raised expectations.

"I don't feel the pressure too much. I know the things I have to do. I need to play relaxed and not mind if I lose or if I play well or not," he said. "My goal is always the same. To feel comfortable on court. To enjoy playing tennis and try to have great thoughts when playing. That is why I am playing at a good level. I am enjoying every single second and playing relaxed. That is what I am thinking about on court," he added.

As at Indian Wells, world number two Novak Djokovic is missing after being refused entry to the United States due to his lack of a Covid vaccine and

Alcaraz says he misses the Serb's presence, along with the injured Rafael Nadal. "I'm a professional tennis player, but also I'm a huge fan of tennis and I always want to watch the best players in the world, like Rafa, like Djokovic," he said. "I played a couple of times against Rafa and I wish to play against him more and with Djokovic as well. I wish to play against him more times, you know, but obviously in every tournament I want them to be playing and I hope we get them back soon," he said.

Far from feeling the weight of following in the footsteps of the 'Big Three' of Djokovic, Nadal and the now retired Roger Federer, Alcaraz says he is trying to draw lessons from their successes. "You have to improve, you have to get better every day. That's why the big players, the Big Three, for example, did all through their careers - to improve every day a little bit," he said. Alcaraz can expect plenty of support from the crowd in Miami, which in-

cludes many Spanish-speaking fans. "It's so special to come back here and feel the same energy that I felt, for example, last year," he said. "I have great supporters here, a lot of people supporting me. I remember last year it was unbelievable you know, with the crowd. I feel like I am at home, you know," he said.

The top seed will begin his title defence against Argentine Facundo Bagnis or a qualifier and could face two-time Miami champion and former world number one Andy Murray in the third round. Alcaraz said he was full of admiration for the Scotsman and recently told him in a message during Murray's run to the final of the Qatar Open.

"Andy is a magnificent player, one of the Big Four," said Alcaraz. "It was amazing to watch him play and also learn from him away from the court. What he has done to return from surgery after they told him he would not play again, that is an inspiration for all of us," he said.



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain fields questions from the media during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

TENNIS

Giorgi hangs on to edge past Kanepi in Miami

'A strong episode of tough cough led to a rib injury. I am still feeling discomfort and pain and I can't compete'

Reuters
Miami

Italy's Camila Giorgi survived a near nightmare third-set collapse to edge Estonian Kaia Kanepi 7-6(4) 6-7(4) 7-6(4) in a marathon first-round match at the Miami Open on Tuesday.

Giorgi appeared in complete control when she took a 5-0 third set lead but the veteran Kanepi refused to go away, erasing two match points to draw level at 5-5.

Despite issuing 14 double faults and at one point throwing her racket in frustration, Giorgi stayed composed in the final set breaker, smacking a forehand winner on match point to end the three-hour, 32-minute slugfest.

Giorgi will next face 14th-seeded Victoria Azarenka, who like the other 32 seeded players at the tournament received a first-round bye.

Elsewhere, Belgian Elise Mertens brushed aside American Alycia Parks 6-1 6-4 to set up a second-round clash with eighth-seed Daria Kasatkina.

Mertens, a three-time Grand Slam champion in doubles, put her net skills to good use to see off Parks and set up a meeting with the crafty Kasatkina.

"She has a very good forehand and she can get a lot of balls back," Mertens said of the Russian. "She's number eight seed for a reason. I'm just going to try to focus on myself." Canadians Rebecca Marino and Katherine Sebov, Ukrainian Marta Kostyuk and China's Wang Xiyu were among the other first-round winners at the WTA 1000 event.



Italy's Camila Giorgi hits a forehand against Kaia Kanepi of Spain (not pictured) during day two of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. (USA TODAY Sports)

DEFENDING CHAMPION SWIATEK PULLS OUT OF MIAMI OPEN

Iga Swiatek has withdrawn from the Miami Open due to a rib injury, the world number one and defending champion said yesterday.

Top seed Swiatek was due to begin her campaign against American Claire Liu in the second round today after being given a bye in the first round.

"You know that in and after Doha I was struggling with a strong infection," Swiatek said.

"I was allowed to play, but a strong episode of tough cough led to a rib injury. We were trying to handle it and continue to play as long as it was safe for me. We were analysing the data in the last days and my doctor prepared my diagnosis.

"Unfortunately, I'm still feeling a lot of

discomfort and pain and I can't compete."

Swiatek added that the injury would also keep her out of Poland's Billie Jean King Cup qualifier against Kazakhstan in mid-April.

"I will keep you updated about where I play next, because it depends on my process of recovering and the recommendation of my medical team," Swiatek added.

Djokovic has 'no regrets' about missing US events over Covid vaccine status

Miami: Novak Djokovic said he had no regrets about missing tournaments at Indian Wells and Miami due to his Covid-19 vaccination status but hoped that he would be allowed into the United States later this year for the US Open Grand Slam. The US currently bars unvaccinated foreigners from entering the country, though the policy is expected to be lifted when the government ends its Covid emergency declarations in May. Djokovic, 35, unsuccessfully applied to the US government for special permission to play at Indian Wells and Miami.



doing off the court," he said. "The dignity, and integrity, and staying true to myself, and my beliefs and my rights are above everything."

Carlos Alcaraz leapfrogged the Serb back into top spot in the world rankings after winning the Indian Wells title on Sunday. "I have no regrets," Djokovic told CNN. "I've learned through life that regrets only hold you back and basically make you live in the past.

"I don't want to do that. I also don't want to live too much in the future. I want to be as much as in the present moment but of course think about future, create a better future.

"So I congratulate Alcaraz. He absolutely deserves to come back to number one." Djokovic said it was a pity he was not allowed to compete in the US where he has enjoyed plenty of success including three of his 22 major titles.

"But at the same time, it's the conscious decision I made and I knew that there is always a possibility that I won't go," Djokovic said. "It's the current state or current situation that I hope will change for later this year, for the US Open. That's the most important tournament for me on American soil." The Serb said the controversy had not dented his enthusiasm for the sport.

"Actually, the contrary, I'm as enthusiastic as ever, as motivated as ever for the sport, my family, my foundation, all the projects and everything I'm

Sabalenka found it tough to face 'hate' in locker room

Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka said she struggled to understand the "hate" she encountered in the locker room amid strained relations between some players following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The world number two has previously said she has nothing against Ukrainian people and felt bad for them as Moscow's action rages on. Belarus has been a staging area for the invasion, which Moscow calls a "special military operation". "It was really tough for me because I've never faced that much hate in the locker room," Sabalenka said ahead of the Miami Open. "There are a lot of haters on Instagram when you're losing matches, but in the locker room I've never faced that.

"It was really tough to understand that there's so many people who hate me for no reason. I did nothing." Australian Open champion Sabalenka lost in the final of Indian Wells to Elena Rybakina on Sunday.

Sabalenka said she had been having "weird conversations" with members of some players' teams in the last year.

MOTORSPORT

Toyota Gazoo Racing makes spectacular start to the 2023 WRC season

Toyota Gazoo Racing (TGR) dominated the opening round of the 2023 FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) to earn a one-two victory in the 1000 Miles of Sebring in the face of strong Hypercar competition. The No. 7 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar of Mike Conway, Kamui Kobayashi, and José María López claimed a hard-fought victory after 239 laps at the home of endurance racing in the United States.

After an exciting race-long battle at the front, World Champions and 2022 Le Mans winners Sébastien Buemi, Brendon Hartley, and Ryo Hirakawa completed a perfect result for (TGR) by finishing second in the No. 8 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar.

Relentless consistency, flawless team operations and strong tyre management combined as TGR overcame the challenge of several new Hypercar rivals joining this year's championship to

lap all competitors twice and earn the team's 40th WEC victory.

The team was immediately in the fight at the front when the green flags waved in Florida. Buemi set a new Hypercar race lap record as he and Conway edged clear of the competition. At the two-hour mark, little separated the GR010 HYBRIDS and their gap over the chasing pack was enough to keep them ahead through the first driver changes.

As half distance approached, Kobayashi moved the No. 7 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar to the front and soon after, early in the fifth hour, he handed over to López.

Hirakawa took the wheel of the second-placed No. 8 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar to resume an intra-team battle for victory, with the pair now a lap clear of the competition.

After Kobayashi and Buemi returned to their respective cockpits, the gap at the front began



Podium ceremony after the opening round of the 2023 FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC). After an exciting race-long battle at the front, World Champions and 2022 Le Mans winners Sébastien Buemi, Brendon Hartley, and Ryo Hirakawa completed a perfect result for TGR.

to grow during the seventh hour. As the sun set on Sebring, Conway ticked off the remaining laps without taking risks and Hartley reduced the gap steadily. Con-

way crossed the line in the No. 7 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar, just 2.168 secs ahead of Hartley to conquer the biggest-ever top-class grid for a WEC season-

opener and earn maximum race points.

Akio Toyoda, President of Toyota Motor Corporation and TGR Team Founder, said: "Con-

gratulations and thank you to all the drivers and team members who finished this important first round with a one-two finish. Even if the car changes and the number of rivals increases, I once again feel that racing is a team effort.

Since Kamui became Team Principal, the power of the team has definitely grown stronger. He contributes to victory as a driver, and as Team Principal keeps communication with the members and keeps the team together. Kamui, thank you very much. Let's keep fighting to make the GR010 Hybrid Electric Vehicle an 'ever-better car!'"

Over the years, Toyota has been participating in many different forms of motorsports, including Formula One, the World Endurance Championship (WEC), and the Nürburgring 24 Hours endurance race.

Toyota's participation in these events was overseen by separate entities within the company un-

til April 2015, when Toyota established TGR, to consolidate all of its motorsport's activities under one in-house brand.

Representing Toyota's belief that "the roads build the people, and the people build the cars," TGR highlights the role of motorsports as a fundamental pillar of Toyota's commitment to making 'ever-better' cars.

Harnessing years of experience gained under the extreme conditions of various motorsports events, TGR aims to forge new technologies and solutions that bring the freedom, adventure, and joy of driving to everyone.

This season, the GR010 HYBRID Electric Hypercar has undergone a series of evolutions in key areas.

Adjustments have been made to the high-performance Racing Hybrid powertrain to reduce weight and enhance performance, which consists of a 520kW (707PS) 3.5 litre engine and 200kW (272PS) electric motor.

HORSE RACING

Ernest Aldrich claims Al Jassasiya Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Abdulatif Hussain al-Emadi-owned and Zuhair Mohsen-trained Ernest Aldrich won the feature race of the Al Jassasiya Cup meeting, a 1,900m Handicap (80-100) for four-year-old+ Thoroughbreds yesterday.

At the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) Al Rayyan Race Course, Ernest Aldrich won by over two lengths under a perfect ride by jockey Lukas Delozier. QREC Racing Manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi crowned the winners.

In the penultimate race of the day, trainer Mohamed Khaled Elahmed recorded a quick-fire double as he saddled Ushayqer, carrying the colours of Mohamed Abdulla al-Abdulmalik, to win the 1,200m Handicap (0-80) for four-year-old+ Local Thoroughbreds by three lengths under jockey Anas al-Seyabi, who doubled up as well.

Sabhea Awad Ibrahim's Mutahaffiz proved the best in the 1,200m Handicap (65-85) for four-year-old+ Local Purebred Arabians, registering his second straight victory on fourth career start for trainer Mohamed Khaled Elahmed. Ridden by Szczepan Mazur, the five-year-old gelding won comfortably by three and a half-length.

There was a close finish in the 1100 Handicap (65-85) for three-year-old+ Thoroughbreds as the Al Jassa Stud-



Connections of Ernest Aldrich pose with Al Jassasiya Cup yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim

owned and Abdulla al-Mulla-trained Crush And Run battled on bravely under a brilliant ride from Ivan Rossi to hold off charging Lo De Nalane by just a neck in the closing stages.

The 1,700m Handicap (0-70) for three-year-old+ Handicap (0-70) was taken in incredible fashion by the Al Rufaa Racing-owned and Gassim Ghazali-trained Saxon Scene, who absolutely rocketed home once jockey Alberto Sanna asked him to quicken,

storming huge 10 lengths clear of the field by the line.

In the second race of the day, the 1,700m Maiden for four-six-year-old Purebred Arabians went to Ibrahim Mohamed al-Fadala's ZF Al Saqaaf. At fourth attempt, the Hamad al-Jehani-trained four-year-old colt stormed home in the last 100m to take the lead and eventually prevail by three quarters of a length under jockey Soufiane Saadi. In the opener, Al Anoud Stud's Metrash

got the meeting off to an impressive start in winning the 1,700m Handicap (0-65) for four-year-old+ Local Purebred Arabians by three and a half lengths, having kicked away in the last furlong, under jockey Anas al-Seyabi for trainer Alanoud Khalifa al-Malki.

RESULTS

Al Jassasiya Cup

(Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1 - Al Jassasiya Cup - Thorough-



Jockey Lukas Delozier guides Ernest Aldrich to Al Jassasiya Cup victory.

bred Handicap 80-100 (Class 2)

Ernest Aldrich, Zuhair Mohsen, Lukas Delozier

2 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap

0-80

Ushayqer, Mohamed Khaled Elahmed, Anas al-Seyabi

3 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap

65-85

Mutahaffiz, Mohamed Khaled Elahmed, Szczepan Mazur

4 - Thoroughbred Handicap 65-85

(Class 4)

Crush And Run, Abdulla al-Mulla, Ivan Rossi

5 - Thoroughbred Handicap 0-70

(Class 5)

Saxon Scene, Gassim Ghazali, Alberto Sanna

6 - Purebred Arabian Maiden

PlateZF Al Saqaaf, Hamad al-Jehani, Soufiane Saadi

7 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap

0-65

Mettrash, Alanoud Khalifa al-Malki, Anas al-Seyabi

FOOTBALL

Southgate challenges England to take 'next step' towards Euro glory

The Three Lions' Euro qualifying campaign begins with a testing trip to champions Italy

AFP

Manchester

England's quest to win a first major tournament since 1966 starts afresh today as the Three Lions' Euro 2024 qualifying campaign begins with a testing trip to champions Italy.

After taking time to consider his future following a World Cup quarter-final exit to France in December, Gareth Southgate will remain in charge as England boss for a fourth attempt at glory. Southgate has overseen a transformation of his country's fortunes on the international stage.

But after reaching a quarter-final, semi-final and final in their last three major tournaments, anything less than ending a 58-year trophy drought in Germany next year will be seen as a disappointment. Southgate might have sounded a warning this week about the declining number of England-qualified players playing regularly in the Premier League, but he admitted that is a worry for the long term given the array of talent available to him currently.

Arsenal winger Bukayo Saka and Borussia Dortmund midfielder Jude Bellingham proved themselves to be two of the brightest young talents in world football in Qatar.

Harry Kane's next goal for his country will make him England's leading scorer in history, while Marcus Rashford's potential is



England manager Gareth Southgate during a training session at St George's Park, Burton upon Trent, Britain, yesterday. (Reuters)

finally being realised under Erik ten Hag at Manchester United.

An injury to Rashford means he will miss the opening two qualifiers against Italy and Ukraine this week, but Southgate is not short of options with

Manchester City duo Phil Foden and Jack Grealish set to battle it out for a place in the side.

For all the progress made under Southgate, though, victory over Germany in the last 16 of Euro 2020 remains his only

knockout win against one of the major nations in international football. The Three Lions outplayed France for much of their meeting in the quarter-finals in Doha three months ago, but still came up short when it mattered.

"These are the sorts of games where we have to show we can go to these places and win," said Southgate on the prospect of facing Italy in front of an intimidating atmosphere at the Estadio Diego Armando Maradona in Naples. "That is the next step for us as a team."

England fell short on penalties against Italy in the Euro 2020 final on home soil and failed to beat Roberto Mancini's men in two clashes in the Nations League prior to the World Cup.

The Three Lions did not win a single game in their Nations League campaign but were still able to bounce back close to their best once the World Cup came around. And Southgate is wary of another drop off in standards during a qualifying process with little jeopardy for the major nations thanks to the expansion of the European Championship to 24 teams. The top two from a group also containing Ukraine, North Macedonia and Malta will automatically qualify.

"That is the big challenge we have got. To go to a World Cup, everyone wanted to be there and the fight for places was immense, the hunger was there and it was clear. Now you have to start again," added Southgate.

"I know exactly where our most senior players are with that challenge: they are ready. The (Jordan) Hendersons, the Kanes, they set the tone for that sort of mentality that is going to be needed."

FOCUS

Former World Cup winner Ozil retires

AFP

Istanbul

Germany's World Cup-winning midfielder Mesut Ozil announced his retirement from football at the age of 34 yesterday.

The former Real Madrid and Arsenal player was a key member of Germany's World Cup-winning side in Brazil in 2014.

He retired from the squad in 2018 amid a political debate in Germany about an influx of migrants and after backlash over a photograph taken with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, saying he faced "racism and disrespect" over his Turkish ancestry.

"I've had the privilege to be a professional football player for almost 17 years now and I feel incredibly thankful for the opportunity," Ozil, who most recently played for Turkish side Istanbul Basaksehir, said in a statement on Instagram.

"But in recent weeks and months, having also suffered some injuries, it's become more and more clear that it's time to leave the big stage of football."

Ozil made 645 appearances for club and country, in which he scored 114 goals and had 222 assists.

He began his senior career with Schalke 04 in Germany, before moving to Werder Bremen. His performances earned him a call up to Germany's squad for the 2010 World Cup, where he helped his country reach the semi-finals.

He signed for Real Madrid a month after the World Cup and spent three years in Spain, winning one LaLiga title and the Spanish Super Cup. Ozil made 105 La Liga appearances for Real, scoring 19 goals.

He joined Arsenal in 2013, helping them win the first of four FA Cup titles the following year. He scored 33 Premier League goals and made 59 assists in his time in north London. He also played a starring



role for Germany at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, starting all seven of their games as they became the first European team to win the tournament on South American soil.

"Mesut Ozil was one of our outstanding national team players," Germany coach Hansi Flick, who was assistant coach at the 2014 World Cup, said.

"In his most successful time he was among the best players in the world. I enjoyed working with him. He had exceptional abilities. His skills and game overview were outstanding."

Ozil scored 23 international goals in his 92 matches for Germany.

"We all at the national team wish him and his family all the best for his time after his career," Flick said.

Ozil joined Turkish side Fenerbahce in 2021 after Arsenal terminated his contract and then moved to Istanbul Basaksehir less than a year later.

"It has been an amazing journey filled with unforgettable moments and emotions," he added.

"I want to thank my clubs - Schalke 04, Werder Bremen, Real Madrid, Arsenal FC, Fenerbahce, Basaksehir and the coaches who supported me, plus team mates who have become friends.

"Now I'm looking forward to everything that is in front of me with my beautiful wife, Amine, and my two beautiful daughters, Eda and Ela."

Messi 'madness' in Argentina as world champions play first match

Lionel Messi and his Argentina teammates will make a triumphant return in their homeland today when they play their first match since winning the World Cup in Qatar.

More than 1.5mn fans applied for 63,000 available tickets for the match against Central American minnows Panama at the Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires.

Football-mad Argentines were out in even larger numbers following the Albi-celeste's dramatic penalty shoot-out victory over France in December. An estimated five million people thronged the streets of Buenos Aires a few days later for the trophy parade.

Such was the multitude that the parade had to be abandoned long before it reached central Buenos Aires as it was already hours behind schedule. Messi had been widely expected to retire from international football after the final in Doha, in which he scored two goals and a shoot-out spot-kick, but the Paris Saint-Germain forward said he wanted to carry on a bit longer so he could wear the blue and white Argentina jersey as a world champion. "He is in good shape, he wants to keep coming. When he tells me that he doesn't feel good, we'll see," coach Lionel Scaloni said on Tuesday. "At the moment he is happy with the national

team." The expectation was slightly soured earlier this month when two men fired shots at a closed supermarket belonging to the family of Messi's wife, before leaving a menacing message aimed at the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner. "Messi, we're waiting for you. Javkin is a narco, he won't take care of you," said the handwritten message left on the ground, in reference to Pablo Javkin, the mayor of Messi's hometown Rosario, around 320 kilometres north of Buenos Aires. Messi, though, has taken it all in his stride, as his father pointed out. "I spoke to the kid and he told me: 'relax,'" Jorge Messi told reporters. For

the mayor of Rosario, it was more of a publicity stunt than a genuine threat. "What story goes more quickly viral in the world than an attack on Messi?" said Javkin. While it may not directly affect Messi, the incident did highlight a growing problem in the 35-year-old's home town. Rosario is a port city on the Parana river that has gradually become a nerve centre for drug trafficking and the most violent city in Argentina, with 287 murders in 2022. "Everyone will want to beat us! A party atmosphere is expected in Buenos Aires for the team's competitive homecoming. With 20,000 places in

the 83,000-capacity stadium reserved for invitees, the remaining tickets were snapped up within two hours of going on sale. The cheapest cost 12,000 pesos (\$60) up to 49,000 pesos (\$245), which is more than half the average monthly salary in the South American country. Argentine football federation president Claudio Tapia said the body had received more than 130,000 requests for media accreditation, in a stadium that has capacity for just 344 journalists. "We would love to be able to accommodate everyone, but we would need two... stadiums, just for journalists. The madness for Argentina is total," said Tapia. (AFP)



Argentina's Lionel Messi during a training session in Ezeiza, Buenos Aires, yesterday, ahead of their friendly matches against Panama and Curacao. (AFP)