



FOCUS | Page 2

Rohit wants IPL players to manage workload



TENNIS | Page 3

Andreescu beats Raducanu, Murray crashes out in Miami



Friday, March 24, 2023
Ramadan 2, 1444 AH

GULF TIMES
SPORT



CRICKET

Bangladesh thrash dismal Ireland by 10 wickets to win series 2-0

Page 2

AL DUHAIL TO MEET UMM SALAL IN OOREDOO CUP FINAL





Al Duhail's Ferjani Sassi (centre) celebrate with teammate after scoring a goal against Al Sadd in the Ooredoo Cup semi-final at the Suheim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. Al Duhail won 3-1. **RIGHT:** In the second semi-final Umm Salal defeated Al Arabi (in white) 2-1 to enter the final.

FOCUS

Doping ban on Russia lifted, but athletes still suspended

World Athletics lifts ban put in place in 2015, Russia and Belarussia remain banned due to Ukraine invasion



World Athletics president Sebastian Coe.



Ukrainian refugees protest against any participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games in Essen, Germany, on Wednesday. *(Reuters)*

Reuters
London

World Athletics has voted to end its eight-year ban of the Russian Athletics Federation (RusAF) but the country's athletes, and those of Belarus, will remain excluded from international competition because of WA's ongoing separate ban over the invasion of Ukraine, the governing body said yesterday.

"Council approved the recommendation to exclude athletes and officials from Russia and Belarus from all our world athletics series events for foreseeable future due to the invasion and ongoing war in Ukraine," WA President Sebastian Coe told a remote news conference.

The International Olympic Committee is exploring ways to enable sportsmen and women from those nations to compete as neutrals at the 2024 Paris Olympics but Coe said they would remain ineligible in athletics.

The Council also recommended that organisers of the Diamond League and other Tours take the same approach and exclude athletes and officials from both countries.

Russia reacted by condemning the "politicised restrictions" as unacceptable, but did hail the steps taken to achieve the end of the doping ban.

Coe had previously said Russia would need to "get out of Ukraine" before any reinstatement could be considered. He said yesterday that a working group would be established to advise Council on the conditions that would need to be met for the ban to be lifted.

"The unprecedented sanctions imposed on Russia and Belarus by countries and industries all over the world appear to be the only peaceful way to disrupt and disable Russia's current intentions and restore peace," he said. "The death and destruction we have seen in Ukraine over the past year, including the deaths of some 185 athletes, have only hardened my resolve on this matter.

"The integrity of our major international competitions has already been substantially damaged by the actions of the Russian and Belarusian governments, through the hardship inflicted on Ukrainian athletes and the destruction of Ukraine's sports systems. Russian and Belarusian athletes, many of whom have military affiliations, should not be beneficiaries of these actions."

Russian sports minister Oleg Matytsin, quoted by the RIA Novosti news agency, said: "We consider these politicised restrictions unacceptable, especially in the context of the recent speech by (IOC President) Thomas Bach against political influence in sport.

The Olympic Games should remain neutral, and international federations should give all the best athletes the right to compete in their sport."

STRONGLY RESTATED

With the war ban so strongly restated, the end of the doping suspension seemed almost irrelevant, having been around the top of Coe's agenda from his first year of office in 2015.

RusAF was banned that year after the discovery of massive, state-sponsored doping and related cover-ups and a failure to meaningfully address the issue meant that the suspension remained in place.

However, Rune Andersen, head of WA's Russia Task Force, reported in November that he was satisfied with the "new culture of good governance and zero tolerance for doping throughout the organisation".

"An independent audit team confirms that RusAF has met all the detailed KPIs and other requirements set out in the reinstatement plan," Andersen said on Thursday.

"RusAF has accepted a detailed set of post-reinstatement conditions designed to ensure there is no backsliding from the significant progress."

Coe said there were 35 special conditions to be applied for the next three years with a review at the end of that period. In recent years, dozens of Russian athletes had been allowed to compete as neutrals if they could show a doping-free background but they too remain unable to compete after the decision to maintain the "war ban". The neutral athlete programme has now ended.

Matytsin said the lifting of the 2015 ban was a "clear vindication of the effectiveness of the system of combating doping in sports".

"Russia has established a strict anti-doping system at all levels," he said.

"We continue to foster a culture of clean sports among athletes, coaches and specialists. I am sure that the decision of World Athletics will give a new impetus to the implementation of our goals to further develop athletics."

Ronaldo breaks all-time international caps record

LISBON: Cristiano Ronaldo broke the men's international appearance record yesterday by starting Portugal's Euro 2024 qualifier against Liechtenstein. The 38-year-old, who was dropped from the Portuguese starting XI during the World Cup in Qatar last year, won a 197th cap for his country. "Records are my motivation," Ronaldo told reporters on Wednesday. "I want to become the most capped player in history. That would make me proud. "But it doesn't stop there, I still want to be called up very often."

Ronaldo made his international debut in 2003 and became the first man to score in five World Cups last year before Portugal lost to Morocco in the quarter-finals. He is currently playing for Saudi club Al Nassr after an acrimonious end to his second spell at Manchester United. Ronaldo's appearance off the bench in the defeat by Morocco equalled the previous mark of 196 caps held by Kuwait's Bader al-Mutawa.

He left the pitch in tears following Portugal's shock 1-0 loss against the North Africans. The five-time Ballon d'Or winner will also be hoping to increase his record tally of 118 international goals as Portugal begin their qualification campaign for next year's European Championship in Germany.

Since leaving Europe, Ronaldo has scored nine goals in 10 matches for Al Nassr.

He was replaced as the starting striker by Goncalo Ramos during the World Cup, with the Benfica youngster scoring a hat-trick in a last-16 win over Switzerland. But veteran coach Fernando Santos stepped down following the tournament and new boss Roberto Martinez has immediately put his faith in Ronaldo, who also captains the side. There were questions over whether his 20-year international career had ended in Qatar as Ronaldo will be 39 by the time Euro 2024 kicks off. But Martinez, who left his role as Belgium coach after the World Cup, has strongly defended his decision to keep Ronaldo in the fold. *(AFP)*

SPORT

PREVIEW

New-look Pakistan, Afghanistan eye T20 glory

AFP
Sharjah

Pakistan skipper Shadab Khan vowed his new-look side will put up a good fight against a formidable Afghanistan side in the three-match Twenty20 International series starting in Sharjah today.

Shadab replaced Babar Azam for the series as Pakistan decided to rest their regular skipper along with seniors Mohamed Rizwan, Fakhar Zaman, Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf.

Instead, Pakistan have drafted in top performers from its domestic T20 league – the Pakistan Super League (PSL).

"It is a great honour for me to be leading Pakistan," Shadab said yesterday. "As a player this is the highest you can go in your career.

"I am very excited for the upcoming three T20Is. We have a brilliant mix of youth and experience, which makes us a well-balanced side, and we have what it takes to win this series."

Shadab previously led Pakistan in a three-match T20I series in New Zealand when Azam was injured, losing 2-1.

Batters Saim Ayub and Tayyab Tahir, and fast bowlers Ihsanullah and Zaman Khan are all uncapped while Imad Wasim, Faheem Ashraf, Azam Khan and Abdullah Shafique have earned recalls.

Afghanistan have also recalled former skipper Mohamed Nabi after leaving him out of the three-match T20 series against United Arab Emirates that they won 2-1 last month.

Wily leg-spinner Rashid Khan will lead the Afghanistan side, having replaced Nabi last year.

Shadab said Afghanistan were a dangerous side "and they have some good T20 players in their side but I am very confident with the players that I have in my squad."

Pakistan have beaten Afghanistan in all three previous T20Is – a one-off match in 2013 in Sharjah, T20 World Cup 2021 and Asia Cup last year. Pakistan agreed to play the series, the first bilateral between the two countries, in place of three one-day internationals that Afghanistan were supposed to play against Australia this month.

Cricket Australia pulled out of that series following an announcement from Afghanistan's ruling Taliban that it was banning university education for girls and not forming a women's cricket team.

Afghanistan Cricket Board chief executive Khan hoped fans will enjoy a good series.

"Both nations have passionate fans who support their teams with enthusiasm and pride," said Naseeb. "As neighbours, we have a special bond and we hope to showcase not only our cricketing skills but also the spirit of friendship and sportsmanship."

SQUADS

Pakistan: Shadab Khan (captain), Abdullah Shafique, Azam Khan, Faheem Ashraf, Iftikhar Ahmed, Ihsanullah, Imad Wasim, Mohamed Haris, Mohamed Nawaz, Mohamed Wasim, Naseem Shah, Saim Ayub, Shan Masood, Tayyab Tahir, Zaman Khan

Afghanistan: Rashid Khan (captain), Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Ibrahim Zadran, Usman Ghani, Sediqullah Atal, Najibullah Zadran, Afsar Zazai, Karim Janat, Mohamed Nabi, Azmatullah Omarzai, Gulbadin Naib, Sharafuddin Ashraf, Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rehman, Fareed Ahmad, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Naveen-ul-Haq



Pakistan captain Shadab Khan (left) and Rashid Khan, the Afghanistan skipper, during a photoshoot ahead of a three-match T20 international series between the two sides in the UAE. The series starts today.

CRICKET

Bangladesh beat dismal Ireland by 10 wickets

Liton Das and Tamim Iqbal the heroes as the home side wins three-match ODI series 2-0

AFP
Sylhet

Liton Das and Tamim Iqbal breezed past Ireland's dismal 101-run total in less than 14 overs for Bangladesh's first-ever 10-wicket win, sealing a 2-0 series victory during yesterday's final one-day-international in Sylhet.

Liton was unbeaten on 50 alongside Tamim with 41, both untroubled by an Irish bowling attack that served up 10 wides and a leg bye.

Pacer Hasan Mahmud claimed his maiden five-wicket ODI haul while conceding only 32 runs after the tourists elected to bat first.

Taskin Ahmed and Ebadot Hossain also shone with the ball to claim 3-26 and 2-29 respectively, with Ireland recording the lowest one-day score against Bangladesh.

"The way we played the whole series was very nice. Now I can proudly say we have a solid, solid, solid fast-bowling department," said skipper Tamim, according to Cricinfo.

"We need to keep believing in our players, there will be ups and downs but we have the unit to be the best in the world," he said.

"The wicket was very good, the way we chased down with authority was a message."

Curtis Campher top-scored with 36, while Lorcan Tucker made 28 after surviving a golden duck when Liton dropped his catch at slip.

"We're very disappointed. Don't think the cricket over the past three days reflects the type of cricket we've played in the last 2-3 years," said Ireland captain Andy Balbirnie.

"We did expect spin to play a big part, but our defence with the bat wasn't good enough.

"We did not adapt well enough."

Hasan struck in his opening spell to leave Ireland tottering at 22-3 in the ninth over.

Taskin then removed Balbirnie for six before Tucker turned up the aggression to hit Ebadot for three fours in one over.

Ebadot soon had his revenge, taking two wickets in two balls, and Taskin sealed Ireland's collapse with a double strike in his seventh over.

Bangladesh won Saturday's opener by 183 runs, with Monday's second match washed out by rain.

The drubbing was Bangladesh's first 10-wicket win in any format, with the hosts smashing records in each match.

Saturday's opener marked their biggest ODI victory margin.

Then on Monday they recorded their highest ODI total with 349-6, Mushfiqur Rahim scoring the fastest ODI century by a Bangladeshi batsman by smashing his ton off 60 balls. Ireland will also play three Twenty20 internationals and a Test during their visit.



Bangladesh's players pose with the trophy after winning the series at the end of the third and final one-day international (ODI) against Ireland at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium. *(AFP)*

BRIEF SCORES

Ireland 101 all out, 28.1 overs (C. Campher 36, L. Tucker 28; Hasan Mahmud 5-32, Taskin Ahmed 3-26) v **Bangladesh 102-0, 13.1 overs** (Liton Das 50 not out, Tamim Iqbal 41 not out)

Toss: Ireland

Result: Bangladesh won by 10 wickets

Series: Bangladesh won series 2-0

FOCUS

Rohit wants India's IPL players to manage workload

Reuters
Mumbai



India captain **Rohit Sharma** said his teammates should consider skipping the occasional match during the Indian Premier League (IPL) to manage their workload ahead of the Cricket World Cup on home soil later this year.

A recurring back injury kept middle order batter Shreyas Iyer out of the home one-day series against Australia, which the tourists won 2-1 on Wednesday, while pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah has been out since September due to back issues.

Rohit acknowledged that IPL sides will look to field their best team in every match and said it was up to the players to look after themselves ahead of the World Cup in October-November.

"It's all up to the franchises now. They own them now," Rohit, who leads Mumbai Indians in the IPL, told reporters after India's 21-run loss in Chennai on Wednesday.

"We have given some indications to the teams but at the end of the day, it's up to the franchises, and more importantly, it's up to the players.

"They are all adults, they have to look after their bodies. If they feel it's getting a bit too much, they can talk about it and take a break in one or two games. I doubt if that will happen."

In terms of form, Rohit played down the struggles of Suryakumar Yadav during the ODI series, the world's top ranked T20 batter falling for a first-ball duck in each of the three matches.

"I don't know how much to look into it. He got three good balls, to be honest," Rohit said.

"He plays spin so well... That's why we held him back and gave him that role for the last 15-20 overs where he can play his game, but it's really unfortunate he could only play three balls. That can happen to anyone."

Australia back on top ahead of ODI World Cup

Meanwhile Australia leave India with the world number one ranking in one-day cricket and will return to the subcontinent for this year's World Cup with confidence after edging the hosts 2-1 in the series.

Australian white ball cricket looked to be at a crossroads only a few months ago, with Aaron Finch stepping down from the one-day captaincy and the Twenty20 team failing to reach the World Cup semi-finals on home soil. Yet Australia's ability to quickly reset, rebound and ultimately dominate was on display again in India where they sealed the series with a 21-run win in Chennai on Wednesday under stand-in skipper Steve Smith.

"I think in World Cup years, it can be very easy to look too far ahead," Mitchell Marsh said. "But we really wanted to be focused on this series and make sure that our focus was winning games for Australia. So, really proud of the guys efforts to be able to beat the number one team in the world in their backyard. It's a great achievement. Very proud of the lads and it's the first step towards our World Cup."

India host the 13th edition of the World Cup in October-November.

AUSSIE GROVES WINS CATALUNYA BUNCH SPRINT

Sabadell, Spain: Australia's Kaden Groves won a mass bunch sprint for the line on stage four of the Tour of Catalunya yesterday on a largely flat run to Sabadell.

Primoz Roglic and Remco Evenepoel remain locked on the same time atop the overall standings with three stages remaining, including a summit finish today.

Groves, who rides for the Alpecin team, pipped Frenchman Bryan Coquard at the line by using a late-thrust, bike-throw move to win by centimetres.

The race left the Pyrenean thermal spa village of Llivia at 1200m altitude for a 188km run to Sabadell. A five-rider break never got too far ahead and Evenepoel's Soudal-Quick Step team made sure the race ended in a mass sprint.

Cofidis rider Guillaume Martin of France leads the King of the Mountains rankings on 40 points.

However, today's stage five from Tarragona winds back into the mountains.



Stage winner Australian rider Kaden Groves sprints as he approaches the finish line during the 4th stage of the 2023 Tour of Catalonia cycling race. *(Reuters)*

CYCLING

Bilbao ready as Tour de France countdown starts

AFP
Bilbao, Spain

The mayor of Basque city Bilbao told an event to mark 100 days to the start of the 2023 Tour de France on July 1 that he was eager to show off his city to a global audience.

The 21-stage cycling race frequently embarks outside France. It started in nearby San Sebastian in 1992. This year's race gets underway with three days of racing in the green hills and seaside towns of one of cycling's heartlands.

"Cycling is in our DNA," said Juan Mari Aburto, Mayor of Bilbao in the autonomous Basque region of Spain.

Aburto said the Basque Country was ready to "show the world that we can host an event of this magnitude." He said the Tour would put Bilbao in the global spotlight.

"We want to show the world that we have become a modern, dynamic and safe city", he said.

Mayor Aburto said he "hopes to attract many tourists in the future" and, in a race where the organisers pay attention to the scenery for an event broadcast in 190 countries, the stages in the Basque country will provide eye-catching backdrops for million of viewers.


FROM LEFT: The head of Basque regional government's culture department Bingen Zupiria, the General Director of the Tour de France Christian Prudhomme, the head of Basque regional government's public administration Elixabete Etxanobe and the Bilbao's mayor Juan Mari Aburto pose with bicycles in Bilbao upon the countdown of 100 days for the start of the 2023 Tour de France cycling race. *(AFP)*

At a ceremony to start the 100-day countdown, elected dignitaries from towns along the Basque part of the route welcomed the Paris-based event organisers ASO.

"The Tour de France is the third-most important sporting event on the planet after the Olympic Games and the World Cup," said the regional lawmaker Unai Rementeria Maiz.

"It will be impossible for the first two to come to Bilbao, so we are very proud to host the Tour," said Maiz, also of the Basque nationalist Party.

The 2023 Tour route for the men's race is laced from the start with terrain that lends itself to attacks. The opening stage around the port city of Bilbao culminates near one of the world's most iconic buildings, Frank Gehry's ultra-modernist Guggenheim museum.

The route is an invitation for roadside fans to stake out a place on what should be a packed route to cheer on a local rider to win the first coveted overall leader's yellow jersey.

The stage will bring the global TV audience into the historic Basque centre of Guernica, bombed by the fascists during the Spanish civil war, an attack on civilians immortalised by Pablo Picasso's painting of the same name.

A daredevil finale on the 20km descent to the chic coastal resort of San Sebastian around its horseshoe bay is likely to provide the show on stage two.

The second and third stage in the Basque country take the race to the Pyrenees and over the French border to Bayonne.

Once the race returns to France, highlights include a July 14 national holiday visit to volcanic Puy de Dome, where fans will be banned and the cyclists will ascend alone.

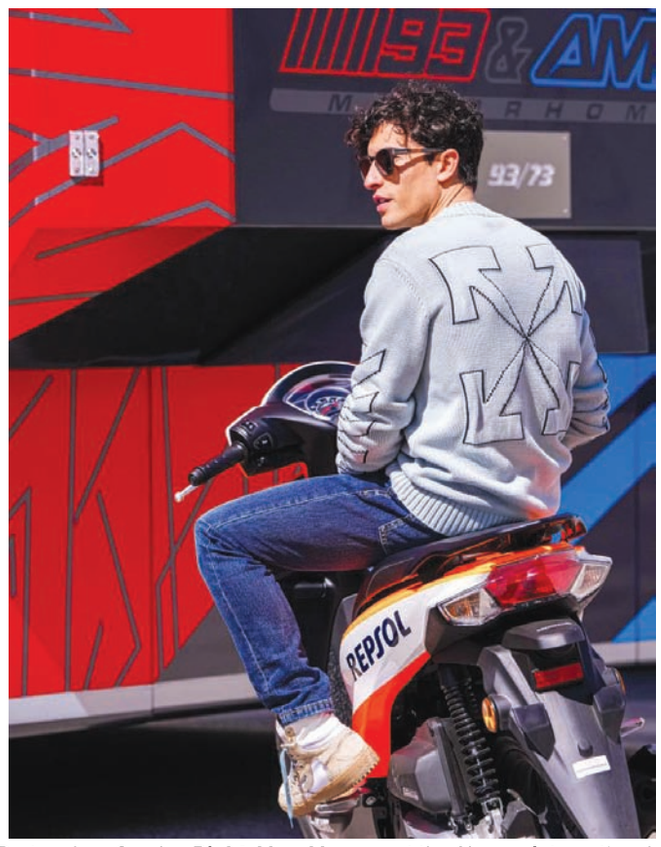
MOTORSPORT

Riders and teams ready for new-look MotoGP season

JOAN MIR, WHO WAS CROWNED 2020 CHAMPION, HAS JOINED HONDA TO PAIR UP WITH MARC MARQUEZ

Reuters
Lison, Portugal





MotoGP riders pose for a group photograph ahead of the start of the new season this weekend. The first Grand Prix of 2023 takes place in Lisbon, Portugal, on Sunday. **Right:** Marc Marquez at the Algarve International Circuit, commonly referred to as Portimão Circuit. *(@motogp/@marcmarquez93)*

The 2023 season signals a new dawn for MotoGP with a record 21 rounds but in reality the gruelling schedule will have 42 races as the championship undergoes a revolutionary overhaul with the introduction of Saturday sprints.

Run at 50% of Sunday's race distance, sprints will not decide the final grid as in Formula One but will have valuable points up for grabs, sowing more chaos in the championship battle.

Four riders from four different manufacturers have won the MotoGP title since 2019 which makes predicting a genuine contender for the 2023 season a difficult proposition, but the loss of Suzuki leaves a big hole in the grid.

Suzuki terminated their deal with Dorna and quit MotoGP for the second time since 2011, leaving their talented riders Joan Mir and Alex Rins to find new teams to continue racing.

Mir, who was crowned 2020 champion on the back of consistent performances and podium finishes, has joined Honda to pair up with Marc Marquez while Rins has joined its satellite outfit LCR Honda, giving the Japanese manufacturer three Spaniards.

But adapting to a completely different machine has not been easy, especially for Mir who said it was a 'nightmare' memorising everything from the start procedure and launch control.

"It's hard because with the Suzuki all of these things are in a different way," Mir said.

"To change everything is difficult. But it's a matter of time," he said during pre-season testing last month.

'FIGHT FOR FIFTH'

Marquez also seems back to his physical best after surgeries on his arm and overcoming double vision following crashes in recent years, but he has had complaints with the RC213V machine too and does not expect a podium at the opening race in Portimao.

"At the moment, if the race was tomorrow, with the conditions we had on track (during testing), we can fight for fifth to 10th," he said earlier this month. The six-times premier class champion has also complained about new aero packages that have improved performances and speed at the cost of sacrificing the spectacle as technology changes the way they ride and chase opponents.

"For the performance, we are riding faster. But for the show, I feel it's not the best way," he said. "I hope for the future, they (MotoGP) need to understand what way they want to go."

CONFIDENT DUCATI

One team who are confident are Ducati with reigning champion Francesco Bagnaia saying they have the right setup this year after waiting six rounds for his first podium last year. Bagnaia overcame overwhelming odds by erasing a 91-point deficit to help Ducati finally clinch the title after 15 years while he also ended a 50-year wait for an Italian rider to win the championship.

The 26-year-old now has compatriot Enea Bastianini as a team mate after he impressed on a Gresini machine to finish third in the standings.

Although he expects to lock horns on track with a "very competitive, very fast" rider, they are pals in the paddock.

"In the race it's another story because we both want the same result, as always, but let's continue like this, let's try to work well with him. In the race we want all the wins, so we will battle," Bagnaia told said.

Yamaha's Fabio Quartararo saw his massive lead vaporised in the second half of last season as Bagnaia denied him back-to-back titles and the Frenchman may find it tough as they perfect the bike setup.

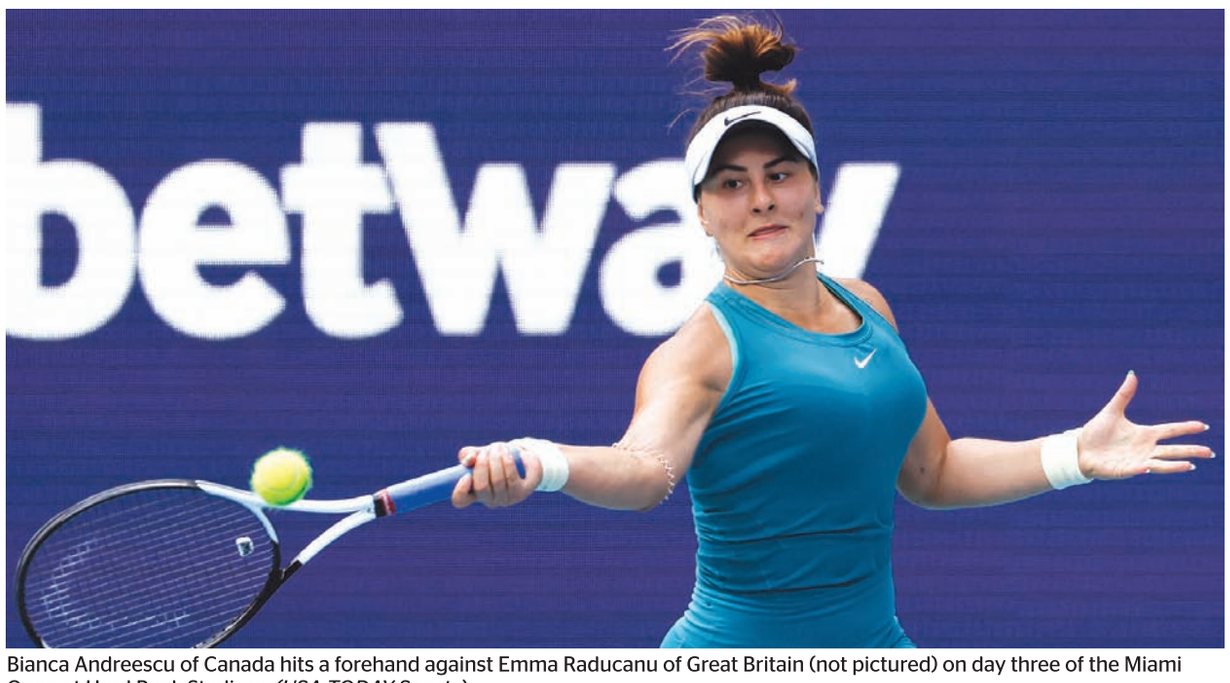
"Honestly, we are not where we would like to be in terms of speed and also our testing schedule," Yamaha team director Massimo Meregalli said.

"What we have to evaluate and decide is the aero package. We have two different ideas and we will take a decision before the race."

TENNIS

Blow for British as Raducanu, Murray drop out of Miami Open

AFP
Miami Gardens, United States



Bianca Andreescu of Canada hits a forehand against Emma Raducanu of Great Britain (not pictured) on day three of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. *(USA TODAY Sports)*

Canada's Bianca Andreescu won a first-round battle of former US Open champions, defeating Britain's Emma Raducanu 6-3, 3-6, 6-2 to advance to the second round of the Miami Open.

There was further bad news for Britain with two-time Miami winner Andy Murray crashing out in the first round after a 6-4, 7-5 loss to Serbia's Dusan Lajovic.

Andreescu and Raducanu, both born near Toronto and both of whom won the US Open as teenagers, battled for 2.5 hours in an entertaining opening to the WTA and ATP combined tournament's main draw.

Andreescu, ranked 31st in the world, struck the ball with confidence and freedom as she dominated the first set, but Raducanu regrouped and fought back in the second.

The 2021 US Open winner went 5-3 up in the set after an epic game which she secured with her seventh break point and went on to force a third set. But Andreescu's power proved to be too much for the tiring Raducanu, who had shown promising signs of an upturn in form by reaching the last 16 at Indian Wells.

"I thought it was a very good match from both sides. I think Emma played really well. I think the key for me was just sticking with it, fighting as much as I could," said Andreescu, who struck seven aces.

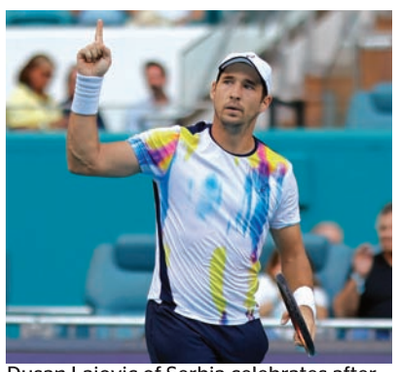
The Canadian has a tough test in the next round, where she will face seventh seed Maria Sakkari of Greece.

For the 20-year-old Raducanu, though, there was yet another injury concern with her reporting pain with her wrist.

"It's something I've been managing for some time. I just need to review after this tournament really and figure out what my next steps are," she said, adding that she may get a fresh pair of eyes to look at the problem.

World number one Iga Swiatek of Poland withdrew from the tournament on Wednesday citing a rib injury.

Murray has made a reasonably promising start to the year, reaching the final in Doha but he was well below-par as he crashed out to 76th ranked, 32-year-old Lajovic.



Dusan Lajovic of Serbia celebrates after match point against Andy Murray of Great Britain (not pictured) in Miami.

The Serb took his chances – winning 72 per cent of second-serve points and saved two of the three break points he faced, while converting all three opportunities on Murray's serve. At 5-4 down in the second, Murray showed his grit to break Lajovic and raise hopes of a comeback but he was quickly broken back as he paid the price for some mis-timed strokes.

"Some days you don't hit the ball your best but my movement (also) wasn't quite there," said Murray who said he didn't see such a setback on the horizon.

"I've been practising pretty well. It's a very different court, very bouncy and much faster than last week (in Indian Wells), very different to the practice courts and...I just struggled a bit," he said.

Emilio Nava defeated John Isner in an all-American clash, the Californian triumphing 7-6 (7-5), 7-6 (7-4) playing positive, attacking tennis throughout.

The 21-year-old Nava ranked 182nd was rewarded for his attacking approach against the 37-year-old Isner, and faces another American in the second round when he comes up against the top US player in the world, tenth-ranked Taylor Fritz.

Another American Brandon Nakashima delighted the home crowd with his big-hitting approach delivering a 7-6 (7-3), 6-3 win against German Oscar Otte.

Italian Fabio Fognini crashed out to Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff, hurling his racket as he lost 6-4, 7-5, 6-4.

Italian Camila Giorgi needed three hours and 32 minutes to defeat Estonian Kaia Kanepi 7-6 (7/4), 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/4), tying for the longest WTA main-draw match of the season.

Shelby Rogers beat fellow-American Sloane Stephens 6-4, 3-6, 6-2 eliminating the last US woman to win in Miami, in 2018.

Rogers has won seven straight matches against her compatriots but faces a daunting task in the second round against world number two and Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka.

Madison Brengle moved into the second round after Amanda Anisimova retired in the second set of their all-American encounter. Anisimova trailed 7-6 (7/5), 5-2 when she retired.

Scheffler grabs first-round win at World Golf Championships

Austin, Texas: World No. 1 Scottie Scheffler finished 1 up on Davis Riley to claim a first-round win at the World Golf Championships-Dell Technologies Match Play in Austin, Texas.

Scheffler was 3 up after carding an eagle on the par-4 fifth hole, but Riley clawed back, pulling to within 1 up thanks to a birdie on the par-5 12th. However, Scheffler responded immediately, adding another eagle on No. 13 before holding on down the stretch to begin his championship defence.

"I got off to a really good start. Outside of that I didn't really play great and Davis didn't have his best stuff today, either," Scheffler said. "Fortunately I saw a putt go in on 18 to finish out the match, and I did my best to try and stay patient."

South Korean Tom Kim was the victor in the other Group 1 pairing, finishing 2 up on Alex Noren of Sweden with one hole to play. Kim found himself 1 down after the first hole but followed with three straight pars to take the lead. Noren had things tied after a birdie on No. 12, but Kim carded birdies on three of his final five holes to prevent the loss.

"Alex definitely is a fighter and I knew that and I knew it wasn't going to be easy," Kim said. "I just kind of kept my head down, but very fortunate to walk off with a win today."

Rickie Fowler pulled off the upset of the day, closing the first round 2 up on World No. 2 Jon Rahm of Spain. The pairing played 17 holes, with Fowler holding a lead for the final six.

"In golf, just about anyone can beat anyone, especially this week with the guys that are out here," Fowler said. "I know Jon will be tough for the boys next couple matches. I've got to take care of business on my end." Other notable winners included Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland, who finished 3 up on Scott Stallings with one hole left, Max Homa, who was 3 up on Justin Suh with two holes remaining and Xander Schauffelle, who closed 4 up against Australia's Cam Davis through 15 holes.



Scottie Scheffler hits from the rough at the 14th hole during the first round of the World Golf Championships-Dell Technologies Match Play golf tournament. *(USA TODAY Sports)*

FOOTBALL

My job as captain is to unify generations, says Mbappe

'He wants me to be a unifier, to bring my team along with me. I am the link between the generations'

Agencies
Paris


France's forward Kylian Mbappe (centre) with teammates arrive for a training session at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis yesterday, on the eve of the UEFA Euro 2024 qualifier against Netherlands. *(AFP)*

Kylian Mbappe's main role as France captain will be to link the old and new generations of players in the squad, the Paris St Germain forward said yesterday in his first news conference since getting the job.

Mbappe was named France captain to replace Hugo Lloris on Tuesday after the 36-year-old goalkeeper announced his international retirement in January.

The 24-year-old Mbappe was given a specific task by coach Didier Deschamps.

"He wants me to be a unifier, to bring my team along with me. I am the link between the generations," Mbappe said.

"I'm captain of my country, it's something you can't shirk. It's a new responsibility. I'm going to take it on naturally, it's not going to change how I play, but maybe the way I behave."

Mbappe said vice-captain Antoine Griezmann had been disappointed by the decision. The 32-year-old forward has been a long-serving player for Deschamps, making his first appearance for his country in 2014.

"It's an expected reaction. I told him I would have had the same reaction," Mbappe said.

"He is perhaps the most important player during the Deschamps era. I am not his hierarchical superior.

"He and I will be hand in hand to try to allow his team to impose itself on a global level. If he has something to say to the group, I'll sit down and listen."

Mbappe, who has been capped 66 times and played a key role in the team's victorious 2018 World Cup campaign and their runners-up finish in 2022, said he would be different to Lloris.

"I don't think the coach made me captain because he thought I was going to do exactly the same thing as Hugo," he said.

Mbappe's first match as skipper will be today when France face the Netherlands at the Stade de France in their opening Euro 2024 qualifier. They play Ireland away on Monday.

Three months on from their agonising defeat in the World Cup final in Doha, France begin a new era with several veterans having retired and Mbappe handed the captain's armband for their Euro 2024 qualifying campaign.

The aftermath of that loss on penalties to Argentina in Qatar has been turbulent, to say the least. Off the field, a series of scandals brought down veteran French football Federation president Noel Le Graet but not before he had agreed a deal for coach Didier Deschamps to remain in his job until 2026.

Not everyone in France agreed with the decision to extend the reign of a coach who has been in charge since 2012, especially as Zinedine Zidane is seen as an ideal successor.

On the pitch, the biggest name to bow out is Lloris, who retired from international duty at the age of 36 and after over a decade as captain.

The Tottenham 'keeper became France's most-capped player during the World Cup and his departure left Deschamps needing a new goalkeeper as well as a new skipper.

With long-term back-up goalkeeper Steve Mandanda also quitting, AC Milan's Mike Maignan will take the gloves when France welcome the Netherlands to the Stade de France on Friday for their opening qualifier.

There was never any doubt about that, but there was some doubt over who would become captain, with Antoine Griezmann a contender.

Yet it was impossible to ignore Mbappe, who showed himself to be a leader with his breathtaking hat-trick in the World Cup final. At 24, the Paris Saint-Germain forward could realistically skipper the side for a decade.

"Kylian ticked all the boxes to have that extra responsibility. But on the other hand it is nothing against Antoine who has always been an important player," Deschamps said this week.

Olivier Giroud, France's all-time record goal-scorer, is still there at 36. But Raphael Varane has retired, as has Real Madrid's Karim Benzema, who missed the World Cup after succumbing to injury on the eve of the tournament.

"You can't replace people who have been there for 10 years, you need time," admitted Deschamps, who said he understood the decision of Manchester United centre-back Varane to step down at the age of 29.

"The demands of the highest level can lead to fatigue, whether that be physical or psychological," said Deschamps, who himself quit playing entirely at 32.

The luxury for Deschamps is that France's conveyor belt of talent seems to be never-ending.

Varane's retirement opened the door for Chelsea prospect Wesley Fofana to get a first call-up at 22. He and Arsenal's William Saliba both then pulled out injured, but the coach then turned to ex-Barcelona centre-back Jean-Clair Todibo, now excelling at Nice.

In midfield, with 2018 World Cup winners Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante still struggling to recover full fitness, Deschamps has handed a deserved call-up to Khephren Thuram. The 21-year-old Italy-born son of France legend Lilian Thuram has been rewarded for his outstanding form with Nice.

The marauding midfielder is the younger brother of Borussia Moenchengladbach forward Marcus, who is also in the squad. Real Madrid midfielder Eduardo Camavinga is likely to play an increasingly important role for his country, and possibly at left-back as the 20-year-old did during the World Cup final.

The same applies to the Eintracht Frankfurt forward Randal Kolo Muani, who almost scored a dramatic extra-time winner late in the World Cup final.

No wonder Deschamps, now 54, wanted to stay through to the next World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico, such is the talent at his disposal.

With France's group also featuring the Republic of Ireland, Greece and Gibraltar, and the top two going through to next year's European Championship in Germany, qualification appears a formality. But Deschamps, whose team face Ireland in Dublin next Monday, is taking nothing for granted

"There is never any margin for error at the top level, but here we are going to have to be at our best right away," he insisted.

"We need to be focused, obsessed even, on our aim of qualification. We must not think we have already qualified. We need to get back to reality."

COMMENT

Germany must take one step at a time as Euro 2024 looms: Goetze

Reuters
Berlin

Germany need to move one step at a time as they look to rebound following a disappointing World Cup last year and not allow their focus to be distracted as they build towards hosting Euro 2024, midfielder Mario Goetze said yesterday.

The Germans crashed out of the World Cup in Qatar in the group stage for the second consecutive time and are desperate to rebuild a team that can excite their home fans at next year's European Championship.

"We have the Euro right in front of us but it is important to take it one step at a time," Goetze told a news conference ahead of Saturday's friendly against Peru in Mainz. Germany also play Belgium on March 28 in their first two international matches of the year.

"What is important is to approach all of it, the issues and our football, step by step."

Germany coach Hansi Flick has called up several newcomers for the two matches but has also retained the experienced 30-year-old, who scored the winning goal in the 2014 World Cup final. Goetze made his international comeback last year after a five-year absence.

Germany's support at home has waned in recent years with the four-time world champions struggling to fill stadiums, having been eliminated early in their last three tournaments. Their disappointing group-stage exit in Qatar has added more pressure on the team. "You learn from challenges and from not so good times. It's not always just going to get better in football. So you learn and you grow," Goetze said.

The midfielder is no stranger to career ups and downs. After lifting the World Cup, he struggled to hold down a starting spot at Bayern Munich following his surprise departure from Borussia Dortmund in 2013.

A return to Dortmund in 2016 proved less than successful before he revived his career with a two-season spell at PSV Eindhoven in 2020, before joining Eintracht Frankfurt last year. "I am relaxed (about Qatar). That's the good thing with football. You can quickly move on," Goetze said. "Our view is going only into the future and we try to take the best from all our experiences. That's what I have been doing for some years and will keep doing."

FOSTER JOINS WREXHAM

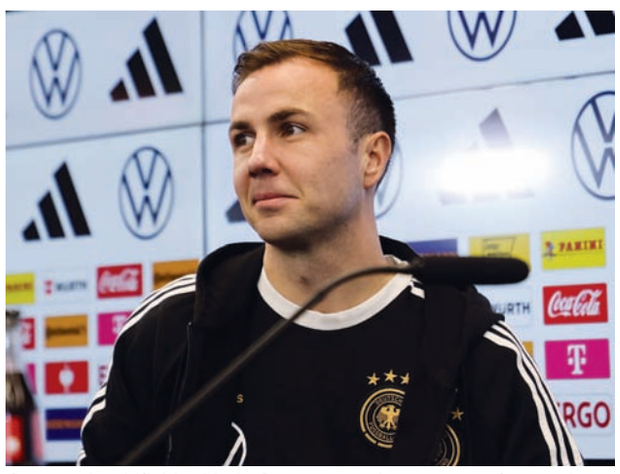
Wrexham's Hollywood owners have secured the A-list signing of former Manchester United and England goalkeeper Ben Foster until the end of the season, the fifth-tier club said yesterday. Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur are reported to have tried unsuccessfully to lure the 39-year-old Foster out of retirement following an injury to first-choice Hugo Lloris.

But Wrexham have pulled off a significant signing as they aim to secure their place back in the English football League.

The North Wales club have been on the rise since being bought by Hollywood stars Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney. "I'm over the moon," Foster, who played for Wrexham 18 years ago, told the club's website. "I've been at the club an hour this morning and it seems a really nice place. Everyone is down to earth and the manager (Phil Parkinson) is top class.

"Its changed a lot since I was last here, but it's nice to be back and it's nice to be back as a player too. It will be interesting to see how my body feels after training today! I'm looking forward to getting started." Foster was on loan at Wrexham from Stoke City in 2005 and shortly afterwards signed for Manchester United.

"If you'd told me 18 years ago that I'd have gone on to have the career that I have had, I probably wouldn't have believed you to be honest so I do owe a lot to Wrexham," Foster, who was capped eight times for England, said.


Germany's midfielder Mario Goetze attends a press conference in Frankfurt yesterday, ahead of friendly match against Peru. *(AFP)*

SPOTLIGHT

Omanyala hopes to close in on world record

AFP
Nairobi


Kenya's Ferdinand Omanyala trains in Nairobi yesterday. *(AFP)*

Kenya's star sprinter Ferdinand Omanyala said yesterday he is targeting a 100m time of 9.6 seconds this season in the lead-up to the world athletics championships in Budapest in August.

The 27-year-old African record holder and Commonwealth champion wants to get closer to Usain Bolt's world-beating time of 9.58sec. Omanyala set the African men's 100m record in September 2021 when he clocked a time of 9.77 seconds at a meeting in Nairobi.

He told AFP during a training session at a stadium in the Kenyan capital that he plans to launch his record attempt in South Africa early next month.

Omanyala will take part in three meetings starting in Pretoria on April 12, alongside his two new training partners, Henricho Bruintjies of South Africa and Sharry Dodin of the Seychelles.

After dashing to 9.94, 9.86 and 9.81sec in two days at the Kenyan track and field meeting in February, the Kenyan police officer said he believes he can achieve his ambitious target. "I started the season well with three fast times. I am confident I will run a 9.6 seconds before the world championships," said Omanyala. "I intend to achieve the target either in South Africa, at the Kip Keino classic in Nairobi on May 13, or in Budapest, to atone for the disappointment of missing a medal at the last world championships in Eugene, Oregon." Omanyala had great hopes for Oregon but he only arrived hours before his first heat because of a delay in securing a US visa.

Jamaican star Bolt set the world record of 9.58 seconds at the 2009 world championships in Berlin, and only two men have come close to that – Yohan Blake and Tyson Gay have both run 9.69. In May 2022, Omanyala recorded a time of 9.85sec at the Nairobi Kip Keino classic, defeating American Fred Kerley, the current world 100m champion and Olympic silver medallist.

In February Omanyala set a new Kenyan record over 60m indoors in France, beating Olympic 100m champion Marcell Jacobs of Italy into second place.

FOCUS

UEFA launch investigation into Barcelona refereeing scandal

AFP
Paris

European football's governing body UEFA said yesterday it was launching an investigation into claims Barcelona paid for favourable refereeing decisions.

UEFA said its ethics and disciplinary inspectors would probe "a potential violation of UEFA's legal framework by FC Barcelona in connection with the so-called 'Caso Negreira'", referring to the Spanish league's former refereeing chief Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira.

Barcelona have already been charged with corruption by Spanish prosecutors for payments between 2001 and 2018 to a company owned by Negreira, totalling around 7.3 million euros ($7.95 million).

The club say they were paying for reports and advice on refereeing but prosecutors have accused the club of seeking to gain favourable decision-making from officials.

Charges were filed earlier this month against the club, Negreira and two former Barcelona presidents, Sandro Rosell and Josep Maria Bartomeu, among others.

Negreira, a former referee, was the vice president of the refereeing committee of the Spanish football federation between 1994 and 2018.

The investigation began after Spain's tax authorities identified irregularities in tax payments made between 2016 and 2018 by the company Dasnil 95, owned by Negreira.

Dasnil 95 reportedly received payments from Barcelona between those years. The last invoice was issued in June 2018. After that the refereeing committee was restructured and Negreira left the organisation.

Joan Laporta, the current Barcelona president, has insisted his club is innocent.

"Let it be clear Barca have never bought referees and Barca have never had the intention of buying referees, absolutely never," he said.

La Liga president Javier Tebas has previously said Barcelona faced no immediate danger because the governing bodies of Spanish, European and world football all have five-year statutes of limitations.

On the criminal level, the accused could face up to four years in prison.

The case has caused tensions between Barcelona and old rivals Real Madrid, with the latter's president, Florentino Perez, not travelling to the Camp Nou for last weekend's Clasico, which was won by the Catalans.

Real Madrid have confirmed they will appear in the case as an "injured party" to defend their interests.

Relations between the two rival clubs seemed to be improving of late, as they looked to launch a European Super League project together in 2021 and remain set on the idea.