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Spurs focus on saving season after Conte departure



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Alcaraz powers into last 16 at Miami, Ruud ousted

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OOREDOO CUP FINAL

Umm Salal hope for Cup magic against favourites Duhail

'In Cup matches, it is not possible to rely on the ranking of teams in the league'

By Sports Reporter
Doha



Al Duhail's coach Hernan Crespo (left) talks to his staff during a training session yesterday.

Umm Salal face an uphill task as they take on league leaders Al Duhail in the final of the Ooredoo Cup at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium tonight. The title clash, which kicks-off at 10pm, is expected to be an exciting one as both teams are looking to tournament for the first time.

Duhail, who qualified for the final at the expense of arch-rivals Al Sadd in the semi-finals, are runaway favourites for the title. The Red Knights have a lethal combination of players, especially in forward areas where captain Almoez Ali, Ferjani Sassi, Mohamed Muntari, Ismail Mohamed and Nam Tae-hee can create havoc.

Duhail's Argentinian coach Hernan Crespo, however, was wary of Umm Salal, who fought back from a goal down to beat Al Arabi 2-1 in the other semi-final. "Umm Salal's presence in the final shows their ambitions and this deserved to be there," said Crespo yesterday.

"It also means that they have the resources to reach thus far and that should make us study the opponents well. These matches can't be assessed based on the results of the league and the team that has the highest concentration will win the title. We will prepare our players well in order to win the first title this season. In cup matches, it is not possible to rely on the ranking of teams in the league," he added.

Duhail are frontrunners to win the QNB Stars League, with a two-point advantage over Arabi and also have a game in hand. Crespo is pleased with how Duhai's season has gone by but is keen to make it better with an Ooredoo Cup trophy.

"We are targeting our first title in the current season," he said. "We succeeded in reaching this stage of the tournament after playing six matches against big teams and we were able to win five matches and draw one. The team was not defeated at all and this means to us that the team is doing well.

"We will rely on players who are physically and technically ready, and we will prepare all our players. This is a match that cannot be taken for granted and we must be at the top of our focus in order to appear at the level that guarantees us the title," added Crespo.

Meanwhile, a title triumph today would boost Umm Salal's morale as they are languishing in 11th and penultimate place at the QNB Stars League table with 13 points. The Orange Fortress progressed to the semifinals after topping their group, but are in the relegation battle in the league.

Today, they will rely on Yassin al-Bakhit, who scored the winning goal against Al Arabi in the semi-final, in addition to Abdullah Khafifi, Joao Teixeira, Adil Rhaili, Nasser al-Nasr and Adel Alawi.

Umm Salal's Moroccan coach Talal El Karkouri said the team has renewed belief after having outfought inform Arabi in the last four. "The match against Duhail is crucial and we will be ready in order to win the title, especially since victory over Al Arabi in the semifinal gave the players a great morale boost," he said yesterday.

"Definitely an important and strong match against the league leaders, but we see it as an opportunity to win the title. Duhail are an excellent team and have players at a very high level. They present themselves well and are on top of the league table," he added.

El Karkouri was in no doubt what Umm Salal will be against today, but was confident that a Cup game can throw up surprises. "Duhail will, of course, be more difficult than the previous match with Al Arabi. I hope that we do not repeat what happened during the first half in the Al Arabi match and that we appear in a satisfactory manner through which we can achieve a good result. We have nothing to lose and this is the nature of the cup finals," the Moroccan said

"We must try to do our best to achieve victory, especially since we are in the final. I have confidence in our players to win the title. We will play in a different way and style, and all we seek is crowning glory," added El Karkouri.

SPOTLIGHT

QOC Athletes Commission holds General Assembly


Qatar Olympic Committee's Athletes Committee General Assembly meeting was chaired by Secretary-General of the Commission Nada Mohamed Wafa (second left).

Qatar Olympic Committee's Athletes Committee held its first regular General Assembly meeting for the sport term 2020-2024 at the QOC Headquarters on Sunday.

The meeting was chaired by Secretary-General of Athletes Commission Nada Mohamed Wafa and was attended by members of the General Assembly.

During the meeting, attendees approved members list, ratified meeting agenda, set up a strategic work plan to achieve the commission's objectives and fulfil its needs in the years to come.

The committee's official budget for 2023, its programs, activities, as well as athlete's worships, field visits and participation in all events across the country were reviewed during the meeting.

The General Assembly unanimously approved the request of Mubaraka al-Abdallah of Qatar Winter Sports Committee to join the General Assembly of the Athletes Commission. To shed lights on the committee's incoming activities, the Committee Chair Nada Mohamed Wafa said the committee will organise a series of workshops in future that will be in cooperation with Olympic Council of Asia and IOC's Athletes Commission.



FOOTBALL

FIFA to pay clubs $355mn for sending players to 2026 and 2030 World Cups



FIFA President Gianni Infantino (right) and European Club Association (ECA) Chairman Nasser al-Khelaifi pose after signing a memorandum of understanding at the 29th ECA General Assembly in Budapest, Hungary, yesterday.

Reuters
Budapest, Hungary

FIFA's compensation paid to clubs that release players for the men's World Cup has been increased by nearly 70% to $355mn for the 2026 and 2030 tournaments, the global football governing body and the European Club Association (ECA) said yesterday.

The Club Benefits Programme affords clubs a share of national team competition revenues in return for releasing players and also protects clubs in case their players are injured on international duty. The previous amount earmarked for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups was $209mn.

A renewed memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed yesterday at the ECA General Assembly in Budapest, Hungary. "We are delighted to have signed this landmark agreement," ECA Chairman Nasser al-Khelaifi said. "The MoU recognises the central role of clubs in football globally and ensures that they are properly represented in decision making around issues which affect them.

"FIFA and ECA will also now establish closer working practices on a future revamped Club World Cup, including the sporting and commercial aspects for the 2025 edition, and working together on future editions including on potential structures for managing the commercial rights going forward. "We look forward to working closely with FIFA over the coming months and years to ensure that the benefits of new and expanded competitions in both men's and women's football are properly shared across the ecosystem," al-Khelaifi added.

Earlier this month, FIFA had announced a 32-team Club World Cup will be played every four years from June 2025, replacing its annual competition which featured seven teams. The decision was met with opposition from leagues such as Spain's La Liga but the MoU will now have both FIFA and the ECA working together on its various sporting and commercial aspects for the 2025 edition.

"FIFA and ECA will also now establish closer working practices on a future new Club World Cup... and working together on future editions including on potential structures for managing the commercial rights going forward."

FIFA also announced a newly structured international calendar which its president Gianni Infantino said had been endorsed by the ECA. Infantino said: "This is a significant day for the future of football and its long-term stability. We are very happy to renew and strengthen our cooperation agreement with ECA, an important stakeholder representing clubs from all over Europe. To have the new International Match Calendar endorsed by ECA provides the necessary balance between club and national team football.

"We have exciting projects ahead, including the new FIFA Club World Cup in 2025 and the new FIFA Women`s Club World Cup. A close collaboration with clubs in Europe, and the rest of the world, will be essential for the success of those events."

CRICKET

FOCUS

Qatar Airways signs deal with IPL side RCB



The Royal Challengers Bangalore players sporting the new team jerseys with Qatar Airways logo emblazoned on the front.

Qatar Airways have announced a partnership with the Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB), becoming the Indian Premier League (IPL) team's Official Front of Jersey Partner.

The Indian Premier 2023 season will take place between 31 March – 28 May, with the Bengaluru based cricket team playing their opening match on 2 April against the Mumbai Indians.

In the presence of 40,000 fans, RCB's home arena – the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, hosted a special "Unboxing Event" that featured cricket legends, celebrities, team officials and the likes of cricket superstars Virat Kohli, Faf du Plessis and Glen Maxwell.

Fans watched the RCB squad train in an entertaining atmosphere, after which the Qatar Airways cabin crew greeted the team during a special jersey unveiling ceremony.

The airline's leisure division – Qatar Airways Holidays, is exclusively launching all-inclusive travel packages, allowing cricket fans to attend an IPL match at the bespoke Qatar Airways hospitality lounge at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium. In addition, the packages will enable fans to partake in exclusive experiences such as viewing practice sessions, signed memorabilia, player meet and greet, photo opportunity with Kohli and more. The Ultimate RCB Fan packages include return flights with Qatar Airways, premium hotel options, IPL tickets and exciting experiences. To secure packages, customers can visit the dedicated link, qatarairways.com/RCB

Qatar Airways Group Chief Executive, HE Akbar al-Baker, said: "We embark on a new journey with the addition of the Royal Challengers Bangalore to our extensive sports portfolio. The team has a passionate fanbase and a well-represented list of cricket legends that have played for the team. Cricket is a global game with a worldwide audience and is a powerful means of uniting people of different backgrounds. From start to end, our RCB packages will take the fan experience to the next level with a seamless journey to witness world-class cricket and entertainment."

"Qatar Airways regards India as an important market where we operate non-stop flights from 13 Indian cities. Our operations from India also serve connections to 13 cities in North America and 35 cities in Europe through our hub – Hamad International Airport, which was awarded Skytrax World's Best Airport award for the past two years. We are excited to partner with RCB over the next three years in what we trust will be a successful alliance."

Chairman of Royal Challengers Bangalore and Chief Commercial Officer of Diageo India, Prathmesh Mishra, said yesterday: "We are thrilled at the potential of the RCB – Qatar Airways partnership. The synergies between both brands serve as a robust platform to build a very strong marketing association over the next three years and beyond. Qatar Airways has a strong demonstrative history of activating world class sports marketing partnerships and we hope the RCB partnership is just as successful. The partnership and its activation will be a benchmark in the Indian sports ecosystem and adds to the aspiration of RCB on its pathway to becoming a global cricketing powerhouse and a lifestyle brand."

The "Unboxing Event" paved the way for several entertainment activities, featuring musical performances from various acts, including international artist – Jason Derulo, who performed live at the stadium. In addition, cricket legends AB de Villiers and Chris Gayle's jerseys were officially retired by the team as a mark of honour to induct them into the club's hall of fame.

Qatar Airways as a brand is committed to supporting global sports, helping fans travel to their favourite events wherever they may be.

The airline is a leading global football supporter, with partnerships including FIFA, Paris Saint-Germain, FC Bayern and Concacaf.

Additionally, Qatar Airways is the Official Airline of Formula 1®, the Ironman and Ironman 70.3 Triathlon Series, United Rugby Championship (URC), Global Kitesports Association and multiple other disciplines including equestrianism, padel, squash and tennis.

WHITE-BALL SERIES

Pakistan clinch last T20 as Afghanistan celebrate series win

Captain Rashid Khan's side bags the three-match series played in the UAE

AFP
Sharjah



Afghanistan captain Rashid Khan (centre) celebrates with teammates during the third Twenty20 international against Pakistan at Sharjah Cricket Stadium yesterday. Pakistan won by 66 runs but Afghanistan clinched the three-match series 2-1. *(@ACBofficials)*

Stand-in skipper Shadab Khan gave an all-round performance to guide Pakistan to a consolation 66-run win in the third and final Twenty20 international in Sharjah yesterday but Afghanistan take the series 2-1.

Having lost the first two match by six and seven wickets respectively, Pakistan's new-look side posted a strong 182-7 in 20 overs before restricting Afghanistan to 116 in 18.4 overs.

Opener Saim Ayub led an improved batting show as Pakistan scored 182-7 after their below-par 92-9 and 130-6 in the first two matches.

Shadab then became the first Pakistani and seventh bowler overall to complete 100 T20I wickets in his 87th match, claiming 3-13.

Afghanistan were never in hunt for the stiff target as fiery pacer Ihsanullah dismissed Rahmanullah Gurbaz (18) and Karim Janat (nought) before his sharp bouncer left Najibullah Zadran's chin bleeding.

Najibullah was stable but could not resume his innings. Azmatullah Omarzai, concussion substitute for Najibullah, top-scored with 20-ball 21, hitting a six and two boundaries. Ihsanullah finished with 3-29. Mohamed Nabi was run out for 17, Rashid Khan made 16 and Usman Ghani scored 15 before becoming Shadab's 100th T20I wicket.

New Zealand's pacer Tim Southee leads the T20I wicket takers with 134 followed by Bangladesh's Shakib Al Hasan (131), Afghanistan's Rashid (129), New Zealand's Ish Sodhi (114), Sri Lankan Lasith Malinga (107) and Bangladesh's Mustafizur Rahman (100).

Despite the series defeat, Pakistan can take heart from the fact that they checked their bench strength, having rested regular skipper Babar Azam, Mohamed Rizwan, Fakhar Zaman, Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf.

Earlier, Ayub hit a solid 40-ball 49 with two sixes and four boundaries while Iftikhar Ahmed scored 31 from 25 balls with two sixes. Shadab, who made 28, and Abdullah Shafique (23) were the other main run getters. For Afghanistan spinner Mujeeb Ur Rahman was the pick of the bowlers with 2-28.

Afghanistan won the first match by six wickets and the second by seven, also in Sharjah. The series was arranged in replacement for three ODI matches which Afghanistan were slated to play against Australia this month in the United Arab Emirates. But Cricket Australia abandoned the series in protest of Afghanistan's ruling Taliban putting a ban on women's education and cricket in their country.

BRIEF SCORES
Pakistan: 182-7 in 20 overs (Saim Ayub 49, Iftikhar Ahmed 31, Shadab Khan 28, Abdullah Shafique 23; Mujeeb Ur Rahman 2-28) **Afghanistan: 116 in 18.4 overs** (Azmatullah Omarzai 21, Rahmanullah Gurbaz 18, Mohammad Nabi 17; Shadab Khan 3-13, Ihsanullah 3-29)
Toss: Afghanistan
Result: Pakistan won by 66 runs
Series: Afgahnistan 2, Pakistan 1

JADEJA PROMOTED TO TOP CATEGORY IN BCCI CONTRACTS



New Delhi: All-rounder **Ravindra Jadeja** has been promoted to the highest grade of annual contracts by India's cricket board after his stellar showing following a comeback from injury.

Jadeja, a left-arm spinner and an attacking batsman, is now alongside captain Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli and Jasprit Bumrah in the A plus category, meaning an annual salary of $850,000.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India announced the list of players for the four grades including A, B and C late on Sunday for the period from October 2022 to September 2023.

The 34-year-old Jadeja, who has moved up from grade A, took 22 wickets and scored 135 runs in a recent four-Test series against Australia and kept up his batting form in the three ODIs.

Senior batsman KL Rahul has been dropped from A ($607,000) to B ($364,000) after his poor showing with the bat in the Test matches where he made 38 in two matches before being dropped.

Jadeja's spin twin Axar Patel has been pushed to grade A alongside Hardik Pandya.

LIST OF CONTRACTS FOR MEN ANNOUNCED BY BCCI
A+ category: Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Jasprit Bumrah and Ravindra Jadeja
A category: Hardik Pandya, R Ashwin, Mohamed Shami, Rishabh Pant, Axar Patel
B category: Cheteshwar Pujara, KL Rahul, Shreyas Iyer, Mohamed Siraj, Suryakumar Yadav, Shubman Gill
C category: Umesh Yadav, Shikhar Dhawan, Shardul Thakur, Ishan Kishan, Deepak Hooda, Yuzvendra Chahal, Kuldeep Yadav, Washington Sundar, Sanju Samson, Arshdeep Singh, KS Bharat

SPOTLIGHT

WPL hailed as 'game-changing' for women's cricket

AFP
New Delhi

Indian cricket administrators and pundits yesterday hailed the Women's Premier League as a huge success after the inaugural tournament ended in fireworks with the Mumbai Indians winning the trophy in front of a huge crowd.

Franchise and media rights for the women's version of the Indian Premier League sold for around $700mn, making it the second-most lucrative domestic women's sports competition after US professional basketball.

Mumbai beat the Delhi Capitals by seven wickets in a thrilling final on Sunday to conclude the three-week Twenty20 extravaganza of the newest addition to women's cricket. England's Nat Sciver-Brunt hit the winning runs to trigger wild celebrations at Mumbai's Brabourne Stadium, which was nearly full to its capacity of 20,000.

"It was like a festival for women's cricket which the entire world was celebrating. The atmosphere at the stadium was at par if not better than any big tournament final," IPL chairman Arun Dhumal said.

"The way the tournament was conducted, the response to the matches, it went off as one of the best women's cricket tournaments, even if you compare with the recently held World Cup.

"As far as TV ratings are concerned, as far as competitive cricket is concerned, it was a great tournament." West Indies all-rounder Hayley Matthews was named player of the series for her 16 wickets and 271 runs.

Australia's Meg Lanning, who led Delhi from the front with 345 runs including 35 in the final after being cruelly run out, scored the most runs in the competition.

Dhumal, former treasurer of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), called the competition "game-changing" for the women's game in the cricket-obsessed country of 1.4 billion.

"It will pave the way for many young girls (in India) to make a career in the sport," he said.

Former England men's captain Michael Vaughan predicted a bright future for the WPL, tweeting: "The #WPL has been fantastic... Only going to get bigger & bigger."

Mumbai and India skipper Harmanpreet Kaur, who became the first Indian cricketer to be signed by an overseas T20 franchise when she joined Sydney Thunder in the Australian Women's Big Bash in 2016, said the WPL will make home players improve.

"The pressure that comes with playing at this level and how to stay calm is what the Indian payers should learn from their overseas teammates," Kaur told reporters.

Mumbai coach and England great Charlotte Edwards, a former national captain who played 191 ODIs and 23 Tests, called Sunday's title win one of her "greatest moments in cricket".

BOTTOMLINE

Taskin shines as Bangladesh beat Ireland by 22 runs

AFP
Chittagong

Taskin Ahmed claimed three wickets in an over as Bangladesh kept their cool to beat Ireland by 22 runs in a rain-affected first Twenty20 international in Chittagong yesterday.

Bangladesh posted 207-5 in 19.2 overs before rain ended their innings, halting the game for more than an hour and forcing match officials to set Ireland a revised target of 104 runs in eight overs.

Ireland finished with 81-5 despite making a flying start to their run chase with 18 runs in the first over.

Taskin forced the visitors to slow down with his three-wicket burst in the fourth over before claiming another wicket in the final over to finish with 4-16, his career-best figures in T20Is.

Gareth Delany top-scored for Ireland and was unbeaten on 21. "(The pitch) looked tricky at some points, but got flatter and flatter. Disappointing to still come out on the wrong side," said Ireland's stand-in captain Paul Stirling.

Rony Talukdar struck a career-best 67 from 38 balls to power Bangladesh to a strong total after Stirling won the toss and elected to bowl.

Rony put on 91 runs in just seven overs in an opening stand with Liton Das, who made 47 off 23 balls.

Craig Young broke the stand when he forced Liton to hole out to Stirling at mid-off, and Harry Tector soon had Najmul Hossain stumped for 14.

Ireland were hoping to put the brakes on Bangladesh's scoring spree once Graham Hume bowled Rony, who smacked seven fours and three sixes in his maiden T20I fifty.

The second match is scheduled at the same ground tomorrow. Bangladesh won the preceding three-match one-day international series 2-0. The teams will meet for a one-off Test in early April.

BRIEF SCORES
Bangladesh 207-5, 19.2 overs (Rony Talukdar 67, Liton Das 47; C. Young 2-45) **v Ireland 81-5** (Duckworth-Lewis target of 104), 8 overs (G. Delaney 21 not out, H. Tector 19; Taskin Ahmed 4-16
Toss: Ireland
Series: Bangladesh lead 1-0 in the three-match series

TENNIS

Alcaraz into last 16 at Miami, Ruud ousted

'The nerves came out. I made a few mistakes that I hadn't done during the whole match. So it was tough to win the match'

AFP
Miami Gardens, United States

World number one Carlos Alcaraz moved into the last 16 of the Miami Open after beating Serbia's Dusan Lajovic 6-0, 7-6 (7/5) as he remains on track for tennis' "Sunshine Double."

The 19-year-old Spaniard, who beat Daniil Medvedev to win the title in Indian Wells last week, looked in top condition as he outclassed Lajovic in the first set to keep his Miami title defence on track.

But the Serb was able to provide some tension towards the end of the second set, breaking to make it 5-5 with Alcaraz paying the price for a sloppy return.

Alcaraz was 6-2 up in the tie-break, but Lajovic won the next three points before the Spaniard's big back-hand winner settled the 91-minute contest.

"Everything was under control or I thought it was but, you know, in the match it's never easy," Alcaraz said.

"The nerves came out. I made a few mistakes that I hadn't done during the whole match. So it was tough to win the match. But I'm really happy with the level that I'm playing and it was a good match," he added.

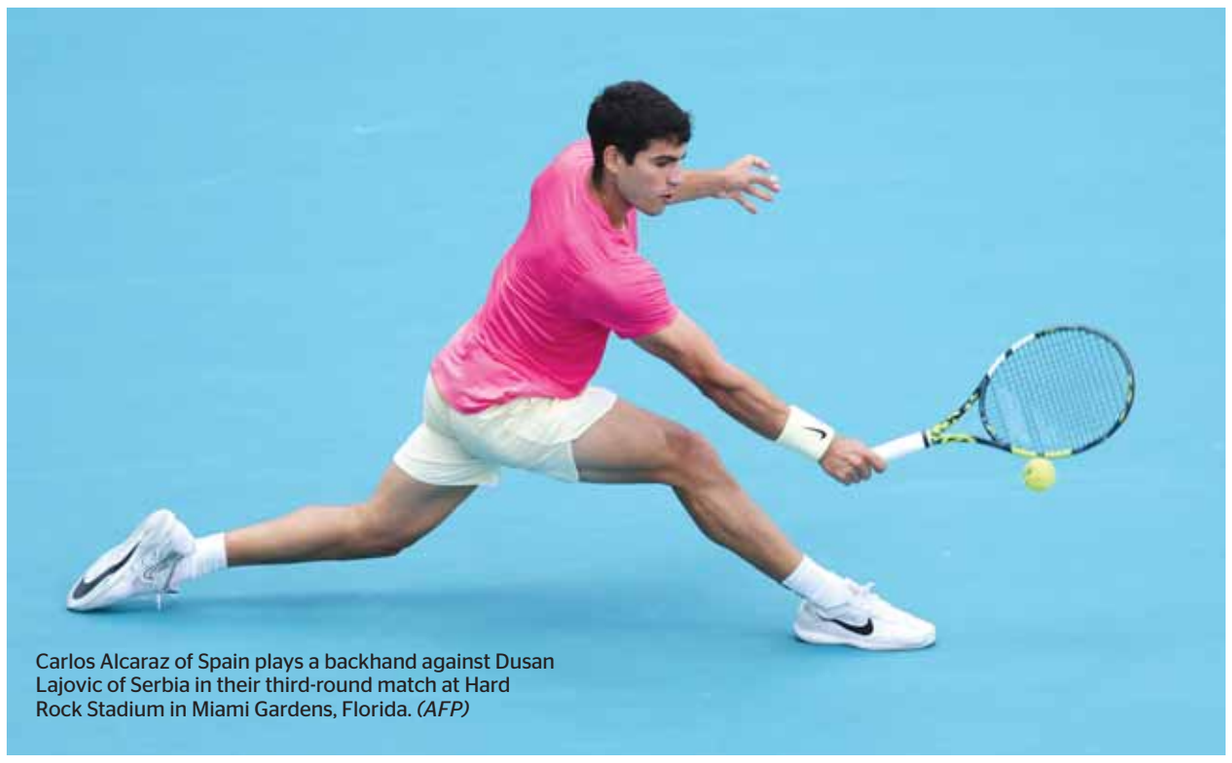
Alcaraz will face Tommy Paul in the last 16 and the American goes into that game on the back of a 12-match winning streak against Spanish players including wins over Alcaraz and Rafael Nadal last year.

"I lost the first and only match that I played against Tommy. I know that he's a really talented and really tough player, so I have to play at my best and let's see what's going to happen," said Alcaraz.

With Nadal injured and Novak Djokovic barred from entering the US due to his refusal to take a Covid vaccine, Alcaraz is the face of this tournament and the crowd was noticeably bigger on the Hard Rock Stadium court for his game.

In the front row of the crowd was Miami Heat NBA star Jimmy Butler who embraced Alcaraz after the match.

Alcaraz said that dealing with his magnified profile is something he has yet to get fully used to.



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain plays a backhand against Dusan Lajovic of Serbia in their third-round match at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. *(AFP)*

"I feel great seeing celebrities watching my matches. It's unbelievable. I feel a little bit nervous when I see a person like Jimmy and the celebrities when I was playing in the US Open," he said.

"In a certain way, I can't believe that these people enjoy watching my matches. For me, it's crazy," he said.

American Taylor Fritz rolled into the fourth round for the third consecutive year after clinching a 6-4, 6-4 win against Canada's Denis Shapovalov.

In a hard-hitting encounter, with both players blasting from the baseline, Fritz did not face a break point during the 81-minute encounter.

Fritz has already won one tournament in Florida this year, taking the title last month at Delray Beach and in the fourth round, the American will be up against 19-year-old Holger Rune in who beat Argentine Daniel Schwartzman 6-4, 6-2.

As always at Miami, there is a large contingent of Argentine tennis fans and they were vocal in their support for Schwartzman.

But Dane Rune converted all four break points he earned in the hot afternoon sun.

"My focus was really to step in every time I could and play my game. I think there were a few rallies where I didn't, but 95 per cent of the match was played on my terms, which was what I wanted," he said.

Dutchman Botic van de Zandschulp triumphed for the third time in four meetings with Norway's world number four Casper Ruud, emerging with a 3-6, 6-4, 6-4 victory.

The tight encounter, with a 75 minute third set, turned decisively towards Van de Zandschulp when he held to go 5-4 up with Ruud going wide at the end of a long rally.

The Dutchman sealed victory, when on match point, Ruud's soft volley found the net.

Italian Jannik Sinner continued his strong start to the year, defeating Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov 6-3, 6-4.

It was an error-strewn match in which players hit double the number of unforced errors to winners but Sinner handled Dimitrov's second serve well as he seeks his second Miami Open final appearance in three years.

Fourth-seed Medvedev moved into the fourth round after his scheduled third round opponent Alex Molcan of Slovakia withdraw from Monday's clash with a right hip injury.

SPOTLIGHT

Andreescu finds her joy for tennis again

AFP
Miami Gardens

Canada's **Bianca Andreescu** heads into the last-16 of the Miami Open brimming with confidence and feeling she has finally refound her love for tennis.

Andreescu burst onto the scene with a stunning US Open win as a teenager in 2019 and rose to number five in the world that year.

But then her career stalled.

Injury in 2020 sidelined her and then the Covid pandemic blocked any chance of regaining momentum and at the end of the following year she decided to take six months off.

"It was honestly me wanting to figure out if I really want to continue playing tennis because I was literally about to just drop my racquets and just say, screw this," she said yesterday.



"I wasn't happy at all. I wasn't happy basically for the full year of 2021 and I thought that if I continue like this, it's just going to get worse.

"So I was like, OK, let's take a break. Hopefully that helps. And it really did. My heart did grow fonder for the sport and now I appreciate it in a much different way than I did before that break," she said.

In Miami, Andreescu has had a tough draw but has beaten two other former Grand Slam winners in Emma Raducanu and Sofia Kenin as well as seventh seed Maria Sakkari.

She will face Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova for a place in the quarter-finals. Those results leave her unsurprisingly in a positive mood, but she says one of the keys to her overall happiness and balanced approach to the sport has been how she handles setbacks and defeats. "Obviously there were ups and downs, but for the most part, I was very, I guess, level throughout 2022, even with the losses.

"I was like, it's fine. I'll go have dinner with my team. I'll go watch a movie, whatever, and not lock myself in the room for three days like I used to," she said.

Andreescu practises meditation and is more than comfortable talking about spirituality and mental well-being and she says her performances flow from her happiness. "I think everything physical comes from the mental side of everything, emotional, spiritual, all that. So I feel like it's mainly in my head. I think that's been the toughest part because I know if everything's good in my head, everything will be good physically," she said.

Andreescu has talked in the past of feeling a little unwelcome in the locker-room as a youngster and she says she would be happy to help new players settle into the sport.

One player she says she would particularly like to talk to is 2021 US Open winner Raducanu, who is experiencing similar difficulties to those the Canadian confronted.

"I would love to talk to her about what happened after US Open with all the success, all the media, stuff like that, how she dealt with it, how I dealt with it, how we can maybe help each other in that way," she said.

"Also, I know that we both haven't been having, I guess, results we wanted. I don't want to speak on behalf of her, but I'm sure she wants to do better than she is, just kind of help each other out in that sense. How can we get better, basically?"

While there would no doubt be much the British player could learn from that conversation, one simple truth is that Andreescu has simply matured.

"I feel like I had a lot of time to really settle down and just kind of figure out what's best for me," she said, reflecting on her return to form. I know it wasn't going to come overnight. I mean, four years later, I hope that I can, you know, get another Grand Slam as soon as I can."

GRAND SLAM: TROUT, WOODS TEAM TO BUILD NJ GOLF COURSE

New York: Mike Trout is teaming with Tiger Woods to build Trout National – The Reserve, a championship golf course near where Trout grew up in southern New Jersey.

Woods' golf course architecture firm, TGR Design, will design the course, which is set to open in 2025 in Vineland, NJ. Trout, the Los Angeles Angels' three-time MVP outfielder, and his wife, Jessica, live in the region in the offseason.

"It's pretty incredible having a chance to own your own golf course," Trout said, per *Sports Illustrated*. "Getting Tiger to design it is crazy. If you had told me before that this would happen one day, I would have said you are crazy. It's more than I ever thought possible."

Trout told *Sports Illustrated* that he and Jessica talked about owning a golf course, pre-pandemic, and the idea evolved through the years as he met with a local developer. Eventually, Trout's brother contacted TGR Design, and a partnership was born. "My favourite golfer growing up obviously was Tiger," Trout, 31, told *Sports Illustrated*.

"I thought it would be pretty cool to reach out. We reached out, got a positive vibe when we mentioned it and got his team down to the site. Once Tiger's team came down to the site, they loved it. It's surreal. I mean, it's friggin' Tiger!

"We talk now. I'm starting to get to know him. I talk to him over the telephone. It's pretty crazy."

The course property also will include a practice range, clubhouse, restaurant, lodging and even a wedding chapel.

The price of the project has not been disclosed.

GOLF

Burns completes top week to win WGC-Match Play

Reuters
Austin, Texas

Sam Burns took 21 holes to defeat World No. 1 Scottie Scheffler in the semi-finals before cruising to a 6-and-5 victory over Cameron Young to win the World Golf Championships-Dell Technologies Match Play title on Sunday in Austin, Texas.

It marks Burns' fifth career win and his first of 2023 after collecting three trophies last season.

It was his debut appearance in the event.

The No. 13 seed, Burns went undefeated this week at Austin Country Club.

In the group stage, he swept Ireland's Seamus Power, Australia's Adam Scott and Canada's Adam Hadwin to win Group 13.

On Saturday, he edged Patrick Cantlay 2-and-1 in the Round of 16 and beat Canada's Mackenzie Hughes 3-and-2 in the quarter-finals.

"I'm so tired," the 26-year-old Burns said.

"Yeah, it was fun playing Cam today. I know he didn't have his best stuff, but it was a great match.

"I mean, I feel like I got off to kind of a – not a great start, but felt like I kind of found something at the end of my match this morning with Scottie, and I was able to carry that on this afternoon." In the semi-finals, Burns birdied the first three holes and Scheffler parred all three. Scheffler won five of the next six holes to flip his deficit into a 2-up lead.

Birdies at the par-4 13th and 15th holes helped Burns square the match. He sank a birdie putt at the par-3 17th to take a 1-up lead, but Scheffler forced extra holes by winning the 18th with a birdie.

BOTH PLAYERS BIRDIED THE FIRST PLAY-OFF HOLE

After both players birdied the first play-off hole and parred the second, Burns' drive at the third play-off hole (the par-4 14th) found a fairway bunker. But he recovered by sticking his next shot 15 feet away from the pin, and his birdied 3 bested Scheffler's par 4.

Scheffler was the tournament's defending champion. Burns' semi-final victory was reminiscent of the 2022 Charles Schwab Challenge, when he defeated his friend Scheffler in a playoff by making a 38-foot birdie putt from off the green.

"I knew after the start I got on Scottie, 3-up through 3, I knew it was going to be battle. I knew he was going to make a run," Burns said.

"I kind of lost my game a little bit halfway through the round and I was really pleased with how I finished and ultimately to come away with the win." In similar fashion, Young needed 19 holes to defeat Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy in the semi-finals.

Young was 2-down through 15 before birdieing the par-5 16th and the par-4 18th to square the match. At the first play-off hole, the par-5 12th, both players had birdie putts inside 10 feet but Young made his and McIlroy's missed.

"It's just further proof that I feel like I can hang with anybody in the world," said Young, last season's PGA Tour Rookie of the Year.

"Rory's obviously one of the best of his generation, if not the best, and one of the best players in the world right now.

"So anytime you get to go out and play 19 holes with him it's a lot of fun. Just thankful to get it done."

But Young will have to keep waiting for his maiden PGA Tour victory after Burns dominated the final. Young won the second hole before Burns took the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth for a 3-up advantage. Burns' consecutive birdies at Nos. 12 and 13 clinched the match.

McIlroy defeated Scheffler 2-and-1 in the third-place match.

This was the final edition of the match-play event that has been contested since 1999. The tour has said that it won't return to the schedule in 2024.

Celine Boutier wins title



Celine Boutier of France poses with the winners trophy after a play-off win against Georgia Hall of England in the final round of the LPGA Drive On Championship at Superstition Mountain Golf and Country Club in Apache Junction, Arizona. *(AFP)*

FOCUS

Toyota Gazoo Racing posts spectacular victory

The Toyota Gazoo Racing (TGR) World Rally Team has scored a superb victory and double podium finish at Rally Mexico, with Sébastien Ogier becoming the undisputed master of the gravel event in the No. 17 GR YARIS Rally1 Hybrid Electric Vehicle after his record seventh win.

In the FIA World Rally Championship's first trip to the high-altitude stages in the mountains above León since 2020, the team performed strongly to lock out three of the top four positions in a thrilling conclusion that also saw Elfyn Evans finish third in the No. 33 GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid Electric Vehicle and Kalle Rovanperä fourth in the No. 69 GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid Electric Vehicle.

Having led from the first stage of Saturday morning, Ogier and co-driver Vincent Landais came into Sunday's finale with a lead of 35.8 seconds.

This cushion allowed them to take a safe approach to the morning's stages,



which included the longest of the weekend, the staggering 35.63 kilometre-long Otates.

Ogier then delivered an incredible performance to seal the victory with the fastest time on the rally-ending Power Stage in the No. 17 GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid Electric Vehicle, securing a maximum score that puts him top of the championship standings by three points despite having contested only two of the three events held so far.

Akio Toyoda, President of Toyota Motor Corporation and TGR Team Founder, said: "Sebastien, congratulations on your latest consecutive win in Mexico. Vincent, congratulations on your first victory there! This was the first Rally Mexico with the GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid Electric Vehicle, and I think the crews were able to drive with confidence in their engines thanks to the Denso radiator team's 'Reikyaku Damashii' – the special name for their devotion to cooling, or 'Cooling Spirit'. I would like to express my appreciation for their strong support and partnership with us. Elfyn, Scott, congratulations on your first podium of the season! The whole team will continue ever-better car-making for you."

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 until 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.

The WRC championship resumes with the Croatia Rally from April 20-23. The first pure asphalt round of the season, the rally will take place in the capital city, Zagreb.

Historic moment as World's leading female players to join Premier Padel

Doha: Premier Padel announced that the world's leading female padel athletes are to join the international tour. Over 110 of the leading female players have signed for Premier Padel with several more expected to join shortly.

The women's competition will take place alongside the men's in the Premier Padel calendar, with discussions now to begin with local venue promoters to assess which tournaments can immediately accommodate the women's circuit.

The announcement is a historical moment for Premier Padel – the official global padel tour and the only one governed by the International Padel Federation (FIP) and backed by the Professional Padel Association (PPA). The involvement of female athletes, under the leadership of the International Padel Players Association (IPPA), strengthens Premier Padel in every aspect as a platform for top-tier competition and the trusted tour of all professional padel athletes.

Launched by Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), FIP and the PPA just over a year ago, Premier Padel has taken the sport to new heights – expanding the number of territories where padel is played at the very top standard, whilst placing players at its very heart.

With the opening tournament of the season – the Ooredoo Qatar Major Premier Padel – completed, attention next turns to Rome, with venues for the women's players to be announced once discussions with promoters are finalised.

Nasser al-Khelaifi, Chairman of Premier Padel, said: "When we launched Premier Padel just over a year ago we made the commitment to have both men and women players play in our tour. With this historic announcement, I am very proud to say that we have achieved our ambition in just over a year since the creation of the tour. Now we look forward to watching our sport continue to thrive and grow – this is only the start for Premier Padel."

Luigi Carraro, President of the FIP, said: "Today is a proud and historic day for padel. Since Premier Padel was launched only a year ago, we have worked hard to have both men and women compete on this global Tour. With over 110 female players already signed up and many more expected, I am delighted with the progress we have made as we continue to take padel to new heights and grow the sport across the globe."

The International Padel Players Association, said: "After conversing for months, the majority of the IPPA players voted to play Premier Padel in 2023, giving support this way to the circuit. With this commitment we want to strengthen our sport alongside men's padel. Premier Padel is a fantastic project for padel, specially women's padel, as well as the international projection of our sport."



FOOTBALL

Tottenham focus on saving season after Conte departure

'We have 10 games remaining and we have a fight on our hands for top-4 place'

AFP
London



Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy admits the Premier League club have a "fight" on their hands as they scramble to save their season after **Antonio Conte's** turbulent reign came to an end. The Italian's departure appeared almost inevitable after his extraordinary post-match rant following a 3-3 draw at bottom club Southampton earlier this month.

But Sunday's divorce by "mutual agreement", with just 10 Premier League games remaining, is a gamble by the Spurs hierarchy, who are desperate to secure a place in the lucrative Champions League next season. Tottenham are fourth in the Premier League table but are just two points ahead of Newcastle having played two games more – finishing in the top four guarantees entry into Europe's elite club competition.

Cristian Stellini, Conte's assistant at Spurs, will take charge for the rest of the campaign, with former midfielder Ryan Mason working as his deputy. With the club out of all cup competitions, at least Stellini can afford to put all of his eggs in one basket. "We have 10 Premier League games remaining and we have a fight on our hands for a Champions League place," Levy said in a club statement issued late on Sunday. "We all need to pull together. Everyone has to step up to ensure the highest possible finish for our club and amazing, loyal supporters."

The writing appeared to be on the wall for Conte when he tore into his "selfish" players after they let a 3-1 lead slip against Southampton, saying they did not want to play under pressure and criticising the club's culture. The 53-year-old's contract was set to expire at the end of the season and he had remained coy over the prospect of extending his stay in north London.

During his 16-month reign Conte portrayed Tottenham's problems as beyond his control, subtly hinting at frustration with Levy's transfer policy without explicitly condemning him in public. But he was criticised by fans over his perceived conservative tactics, despite having impressive attacking riches at his disposal including Harry Kane and Son Heung-min. A total of 11 full-time managers have been appointed since Levy succeeded Alan Sugar as chairman in 2001 but the club have won just one trophy in that time – the 2008 League Cup. Conte was widely regarded as a serial winner when he arrived in November 2021, having won league titles at Juventus, Chelsea and Inter Milan.

In his first season he guided the club to an impressive top-four finish, coming from behind to pip north London rivals Arsenal to Champions League qualification. He averaged 1.88 points per game in the Premier League with Spurs, the second-highest figure for any manager of the club with a minimum of 38 games in charge.

But he failed to bring silverware to hungry fans of Tottenham, considered one of the "Big Six" in English football. Names linked with the job include former boss Mauricio Pochettino, who led the club to the 2019 Champions League final, Julian Nagelsmann, sacked by Bayern Munich last week, and former Barcelona and Spain boss Luis Enrique.

But for now Stellini is the man in the hot seat, with a clear, if unenviable task on his hands. The Italian has enjoyed some notable successes in recent weeks while Conte was out of action following gallbladder surgery, overseeing wins against Manchester City and Chelsea.

Tottenham's next game is at relegation-threatened Everton on April 3, before matches against in-form Brighton and struggling Bournemouth. But the end of April looks daunting, with successive games against Newcastle, Manchester United and Liverpool.

Off the field, Levy's two decades in charge have turned Tottenham into a financial powerhouse, with a gleaming new stadium that is the envy of Europe. But restless fans want trophies. Levy's next decision could be his most important yet.

EURO 2024 QUALIFIERS

Argentina-based Retegui 'needs time' to learn Italian way, says Mancini

AFP
Rome

Italy coach Roberto Mancini warned striker Mateo Retegui "needs time" to learn despite the Argentina-born striker scoring for a second successive Euro 2024 qualifier on Sunday night.

The 23-year-old qualifies to play for the defending champions courtesy of his Italian grandfather but still plays his club football in Argentina, currently on loan at Tigres from Boca Juniors. On Sunday, he looked right at home for Italy as he scored the opening goal a 2-0 Group C win in Malta.

His 15th-minute header followed his debut strike in Thursday's 2-1 loss at home to England. "He unlocked the match, he was essential today," said Mancini. "But I repeat: he needs time, he still needs to learn more about European football."

Retegui, goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma and full-back Giovanni De Lorenzo were the only men to keep their places in the starting line-up after the loss to England. Matteo Pessina added Italy's second goal on Sunday from a cross by Emerson in the 27th minute.

"These are matches where you have everything to lose," added Mancini. "We did some good things, some not so good. The important thing was to win. We could have scored more, but there you go. These are particular kinds of matches, where it's difficult to play, you don't have a lot of space."

RONALDO 'VERY IMPORTANT' FOR PORTUGAL, SAYS MARTINEZ

Cristiano Ronaldo remains a "very important" player for Portugal, coach Roberto Martinez said on Sunday after the veteran striker scored a second successive brace in Euro 2024 qualifying against Luxembourg. The 38-year-old opened the scoring for the Euro 2016 winners by turning in Nuno Mendes' header and slotted home another in the 31st minute as Portugal won 6-0.

Ronaldo, who also netted twice against Liechtenstein on Thursday, increased his records of most men's international appearances and goals to 198 and 122 respectively. "Cristiano is a unique player in the world, with the highest number of international caps," said Martinez, who has restored Ronaldo to the starting line-up after he was dropped during the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

"The experience he has for the dressing room is very important. All players have an important role. The younger ones due to their willingness to play and players like Cristiano Ronaldo, Rui Patricio and Bernardo Silva bring experience.

"It's important to have a complete dressing room."

Martinez joined Portugal after the World Cup, replacing Fernando Santos who had been in charge since 2014. The Spaniard has enjoyed a fine start, with his team already two points clear at the top of Group J having scored 10 goals without reply. Joao Felix, Bernardo Silva, Otavio and Rafael Leao were all also on the scoresheet in Luxembourg.

Elsewhere in the group, Iceland bounced back from their opening defeat by Bosnia and Herzegovina by thrashing Liechtenstein 7-0.

Slovakia moved into second place behind Portugal with a 2-0 win over the Bosnians. Denmark blew a two-goal lead to crash to a surprise 3-2 defeat in Kazakhstan. The Euro 2020 semi-finalists appeared to be cruising to victory in the Group H match as Atalanta youngster Rasmus Hojlund netted twice in the first half after scoring a hat-trick against Finland on Thursday.

Kazakhstan had started their bid to qualify for a first ever major tournament with a home defeat by Slovenia. But Bakhtiyor Zaynutdinov's 73rd-minute penalty gave the hosts hope of a famous turnaround in Astana. Midfielder Askhat Tagybergen crashed a long-range drive past a helpless Kasper Schmeichel with four minutes of normal time remaining to equalise.

Substitute Abat Aymbetov provided the golden moment for Kazakhstan – who have already at least secured a Euro 2024 play-off spot through the Nations League – leaping to power a header into the top corner in the 89th minute. He was later sent off for a second yellow card but by then had already grabbed all three points.


Italy's Mateo Retegui (left) scores against Malta during the Euro 2024 Group C qualification match in Ta'Qali, Malta, on Sunday night. *(AFP)*

JUVENTUS' ACCOUNTING TRIAL HEARING PUSHED BACK TO MAY

Milan: Juventus will have to wait to see if they and 12 other current and former club figures will face trial for alleged financial crimes after yesterday's preliminary hearing in Turin was postponed until May.

The hearing was set to decide whether Italy's biggest football club and individuals including ex-chairman Andrea Agnelli and his former deputy Pavel Nedved would have to defend themselves against accusations of a variety of accounting offences over three Serie A seasons up to 2021.

However a new hearing will be held on May 10 to decide where an eventual trial would be held, with Juve's legal team saying that as the club is listed on the Italian stock exchange it should take place either in Milan where exchange is based or Rome, the location of its servers.

Yesterday's hearing was supposed to be the first stage in a series of off-field battles for Juventus who are making an unlikely bid for Champions League football next season despite being docked 15 points for illicit transfer activity by the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) in January.

With 11 matches remaining Juve are seven points off Serie A's top four positions which qualify clubs to Europe's top club competition. On April 19 the country's highest sporting court will decide whether to uphold the points punishment inflicted by the FIGC's appeals court.

The court, based at Italy's Olympic Committee, will make its decision not on the merits but rather on the legal legitimacy of the court's ruling. It can confirm the points deduction, accept Juve's appeal and completely cancel the punishment or remove the points deduction and send the case back to the appeals court.

Meanwhile FIGC prosecutors are set to close by the end of March their probes into the role of so-called "partner clubs" involved in the suspected transfer trickery and other alleged financial misdeeds including lying about their players giving up salary payments during the Covid-19 pandemic.

UEFA are also investigating Juve's finances in order to ascertain whether the Italian club misled European football's governing body when negotiating a "settlement agreement" following breaches of Financial Fair Play rules. On Friday Juve announced losses of 29.5mn euros ($31.8mn) between July and December last year.

Chelsea say Abramovich sanctions a factor in losses

London: Chelsea say government sanctions imposed on former owner Roman Abramovich were a factor in the club's losses of £121.3mn ($148.8mn) for the 2021/22 season. Russian billionaire Abramovich was sanctioned by the UK government in March last year following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

He was described by ministers as part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle. Chelsea were placed under a special licence that restricted their ability to sell tickets, accept event bookings and even sign contracts with players.

The restrictions remained in place until May 30 last year when Chelsea were bought by an investment group led by American businessman Todd Boehly and Clearlake Capital.

Chelsea said in a statement yesterday that turnover had increased to £481.3mn from £434.9mn the previous year despite the sanctions. Commercial revenue increased to £177.1mn.

The financial results do not cover Chelsea's acquisitions in the past two transfer windows, when they are reported to have spent around £600mn ($645.78 million) in player transfers across two windows

The 2021/22 results show £118mn was invested in the playing squad, including existing player contract renegotiations, but a profit of £123mn was made on player sales including Tammy Abraham, Marc Guehi, Fikayo Tomori and Kurt Zouma.

Chelsea said they continued to comply with UEFA and Premier League financial regulations despite the losses and the impact of the sanctions.

The club said the impact of the sanctions on financial results would also be felt "in the following years".

Chelsea are currently 10th in the Premier League table after a recent uptick in form under manager Graham Potter. The club are also through to the Champions League quarter-finals where they face reigning champions Real Madrid next month.