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SPOTLIGHT

Affable Chopra set to continue his gold-coated legacy

By Sahan Bidappa
Doha

Neeraj Chopra's ascension to the top of javelin throw and his evolution as an athlete should be part of the sporting curriculum. For, at the age of 25, he has achieved milestones unheard in the history of Indian athletics, and the manner in which he continues to handle his stardom after the Olympics gold is heartening to see as well a big lesson for the younger generation.

Chopra was always billed for bigger things in India, after he won the World Under-20 Championships gold in 2016 with a world record throw of 86.48m. He then went on to add Asian Games and Commonwealth Games gold, but his historic Olympic gold at the 2020 Tokyo Games two years ago has skyrocketed his popularity in India and around the world.

His World Championship silver and Diamond Trophy title last year has shown that Chopra is set to dominate javelin throw over the next decade.

On the eve of the Diamond League opener in Doha yesterday, the charming Chopra was the cynosure of all eyes. There were never-ending requests for interviews and photographs from the media, yet the young Indian handled everything patiently with a wide smile.

"After I won the Olympics gold medal, there has been a lot of change in the Indian sporting culture," said Chopra, when asked about his ever-growing influence in Indian sports, particularly athletics.

"The young generation is taking up sports. And it's not just the javelin, there is interest in other sports too. And it's bringing the confidence in the juniors to perform well. They believe if I can do it, they can do it too. In India, we already have six or seven of them who can throw over 80m. And there are two or three more of them who threw over 80m this year. So the interest in javelin has picked up in India. Hopefully in the next ten years, other javelin throwers from India will join me in the Diamond League, World Championship or Olympics," he added.

So how does he manage to keep laser-sharp focus on his career? "Training is like healing for me. I feel really good when I'm training," said the lad from Panipat.

"After my Olympic gold many people know me now, so the biggest challenge for me is to focus on my training and competitions. That's really the tough part for me. So for me to manage all this attention and also compete on a bigger stage in the world is difficult."

Today, Chopra launches his Diamond League defence at the Suheim Bin Hamad Stadium, with a star-studded field hoping to seal the limelight from him. An important and packed 14 months awaits the Indian as he defends his Asian Games and Olympics title, while also hoping to upgrade his Worlds silver into gold in Budapest.

His first test awaits in Doha, where Chopra will be up against two-time world champion Anderson Peters and Olympic silver medallist Jakub Vadlejch. Peters threw 93.07m to win in Doha last year in a thrilling competition with Vadlejch, who set a PB of 90.88m.

Chopra, who extended his national record to 89.94m last year and was incredibly consistent in the high 80s, hopes to join the coveted 90m club in Doha. From Thomas Rohler's 93.90m in 2017 to Peters' 93.07m last season, Doha has a rich history of record-breaking throws.

"This is my first competition of the season. It's always good when you have great competitors," Chopra said yesterday. "Vadlejch has already thrown 88.38m in Potchefstroom (South Africa, on April 18), so I think tomorrow will see great competition. Also, Doha is famous for 90m throws. So we will see, hopefully tomorrow will have great results for all," added Chopra.

Chopra is returning to Doha after five years. In the 2018 Diamond League, he finished fourth with 87.43m, while he missed the 2019 Worlds as he was recovering from elbow injury.



From Left: Qatar's Mutaz Essa Barshim, American Katie Moon and India's Neeraj Chopra pose after the press conference yesterday, on the eve of the Diamond League opener in Doha. **PICTURE:** *Noushad Thekkayil*

DOHA DIAMOND LEAGUE

With world record still on mind, Barshim opens season today

Qatari great is one of 15 reigning Olympic and world champions in action at the Suheim Bin Hamad Stadium

By Sahan Bidappa
Doha

Olympic and World champion Mutaz Barshim has not given up his dream of breaking the long-standing high jump world record. In 2018, he was just millimetres away from bettering Cuba's Javier Sotomayor's feat of 2.45m which has stood since July 1993.

But Barshim – who had earlier in 2017 became the first athlete in history to clear 2.40m in five consecutive years and remained unbeaten that season – suffered a career-threatening foot injury on his third attempt at 2.46m at the Gyulai Istvan Memorial meet in Hungary. But that painful setback has not deterred Barshim from achieving his ambition of creating a new world record. While the 31-year-old has sights on winning gold at the Paris Olympics next year and an unprecedented fourth high jump world crown in Budapest and Asian Games later this year, Barshim has Sotomayor's 30-year-old record in his mind.

"I always aim for the maximum," said Barshim yesterday, on the eve of the Diamond League season opener at Qatar SC's Suheim Bin Hamad Stadium. "I am still active and while I am active, I will keep chasing the best possible. There is nothing like that I can't achieve. If you don't believe it, go home, don't be here."

Barshim said events like the Diamond League 'is sort of training' for him because he has 'bigger goals'. "So I am up for the big fish and that's for me are the World Championships, the Olympics and the Asian Games this season," he said without a hint of arrogance.

"I only look at myself, to be honest. I'm in a different stage of my life, in my career, even though you know where you are. But deep down you don't know because you always surprise yourself. There's always that extra that you're trying to reach and grab. And I say it's a great opportunity to go and grab for extra and to focus on what I need to be focused on because I know the season is so long and I have my own targets," he added.



Mutaz Barshim speaks during a press conference yesterday.

The Qatari has competed sparingly in recent years, mainly due to various injury concerns, but he has managed to get it right when it matters, winning the past three world titles as well as the Olympic title in 2021.

In his first competition of the season, Barshim jumped 2.20m to take gold at the relatively weak field at the West Asia Athletics Championship in Doha last week. He last competed at a higher level in September 2022, so it remains to be seen what kind of form he is currently in, but he isn't easy to beat.

World indoor champion Woo Sang-hyeok of South Korea beat Barshim in the Doha meeting last year, so will be the closest challenger to the home favourite today. USA's JuVaughn Harrison also heads to Doha in great form, having already cleared 2.33m this year.

"It's the start of the season. Definitely, I'm excited. Not only to compete but compete at home," said Barshim. "The start of the season is very important to all of us athletes. Again, you know, competing at home for me is definitely extra boost and I'm looking forward to that.

Meanwhile, World 100 metres champion Fred Kerley will be one of 15 reigning Olympic and world champions competing in the first of 14 top meetings that make up the Diamond League.

Kerley will race the 200 metres in Doha, which will also feature Olympic 200m champion Andre de Grasse of Canada – who also had an injury-stricken 2022 – and Americans Michael Norman, the world 400m champion, and Olympic and world 200m silver medallist Kenny Bednarek. In the women's 100m, reigning world 200m champion Shericka Jackson of Jamaica will take on Britain's former world 200m champion Dina Asher-Smith.



Dina Asher-Smith (left) of Britain, Fred Kerley (centre) of the United States and Faith Kipyegon of Kenya pose after the press conference in Doha yesterday. **PICTURES:** *Noushad Thekkayil*

Kenya's two-time Olympic and world 1500m champion Faith Kipyegon headlines the women's 1500m. She said she was "really excited" to start another world championship year.

Olympic and world champion Katie Moon will take on fellow American Sandi Morris and Australian Nina Kennedy who she beat to the women's pole vault title in Eugene last year.

The strongest field of all in Doha is the men's 3000m. Three months on from his world indoor 3000m record, Lamecha Girma takes on the same distance outdoors and faces a field that includes four winners of global titles. The Ethiopian clocked 7:23.81 in Lievin in February and hasn't raced since. A lack of prior races didn't seem to do the Ethiopian any harm back then, so the fact this is his outdoor season debut shouldn't necessarily work against him.

Especially as the same applies to many other athletes in the field, including world and Olympic steeplechase champion Soufiane El Bakkali. The Moroccan is more at home when jumping over barriers, but he is speedy enough on the flat to be competitive in a race such as this.

Olympic 10,000m champion Selemon Barega, 2021 Diamond League 5000m champion Berihu Aregawi and fellow Ethiopians Getnet Wale and Telahun Haile Bekele add further depth to the field, as do 2019 world 1500m champion Timothy Cheruiyot, world U20 cross-country champion Ishmail Kipkirui and Oceanian record-holder Stewart McSweyn.

The meeting record of 7:27.26 has stood for 12 years, but there are several athletes capable of challenging that mark today.

SPORT

OBITUARY

Olympic sprinter Bowie mourned after death at 32

'WE'VE LOST A CLIENT, DEAR FRIEND, DAUGHTER AND SISTER'

AFP
Los Angeles

Tori Bowie, a three-time Olympic medallist and 2017 100m world champion, was remembered yesterday as a rare athletics talent and warm friend after her death at the age of 32.

Bowie anchored the US team that won 4x100m relay gold at the 2016 Rio Olympics, where she also earned silver in the 100m and 200m bronze.

USA Track and Field and her management company confirmed her death a day after sheriff's deputies in Orlando, Florida, found her dead at her home.

"This is beyond stats and speed," retired US sprint great Justin Gatlin said on Instagram. "Tori was a beautiful human being and had a smile that made you want to smile too.

"A country girl that loved her roots. I remember sitting with Tori and listening to her stories of growing up and racing horses on foot lol. She was a fierce competitor and great teammate. A true legend that made her mark in our sport and hearts."

USATF chief executive Max Siegel said the federation was "deeply saddened" by Bowie's death.

"A talented athlete, her impact on the sport is immeasurable, and she will be greatly missed," Siegel said.

Icon Management tweeted they were "devastated to share the very sad news that Tori Bowie has passed away.

"We've lost a client, dear friend, daughter and sister," the firm said.

A cause of death was not immediately known.

The Sheriff's Office in Orange County, Florida, said deputies had found the woman identified as Bowie "when conducting a well-being check of a woman in her 30s who had not been seen or heard from in several days."

"Entry was made into the residence and a woman, tentatively identified as Frentorish "Tori" Bowie (DOB: 8/27/1990), was found dead in the home. There were no signs of foul play."

Bowie, raised by her grandmother in rural Mississippi, converted from the long jump in 2014 and became the fastest woman in the world that year.

Two years later in Rio, she prevented a Jamaican clean sweep of the 100m medals when she finished second to Elaine Thompson in a time of 10.83sec with Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce third.

She won the 100m world title in London the following year and remains the lone American woman to win an Olympic or world 100m title since Carmelita Jeter in 2011.

"I'm so heartbroken over this," 2012 Olympic long jump gold medallist Britney Reese said.

"You have made a lot of us proud thank you for representing our state of Mississippi like you did."

"This hurt," tweeted Will Claye, who has represented the US internationally in triple jump and long jump. "Long live the champ, the sister, the daughter, the model and so much more!"

Sprinter Tianna Madison posted a picture of herself and Bowie on Twitter as they celebrated the United States' relay triumph in Rio.

Fraser-Pryce, the Jamaican reigning world 100m champion, tweeted: "My heart breaks for the family of Tori Bowie. A great competitor and source of light. Your energy and smile will always be with me. Rest in peace."

US Olympic athlete Lolo Jones also paid tribute to Bowie on Twitter, calling her an "incredible talent" and "A beautiful runner."

Bowie received a hero's welcome in her home state after her 2016 Olympic exploits, the governor declaring November 25, 2016 "Tori Bowie Day." Pisgah High School, in the small town of Sand Hill, displayed a sign designating "Tori Bowie Lane" on campus.

"To see things like that and like this, it's just like miracles, I guess," Bowie told the *Hattiesburg American* newspaper in Mississippi.

Bowie re-entered the long jump and came fourth at the 2019 world championships in Doha, her last major competition.

International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach said in a statement he was "Shocked and deeply saddened to learn of the sudden passing of Olympic gold medallist Tori Bowie.

"In this moment of grief, let me express my heartfelt condolences to her family and friends. The sports world has lost a true champion."



Bronze medalist Tori Bowie of the US reacts following the women's 200m victory ceremony at the 2016 Rio Olympics on August 18, 2016. Bowie, 32, was found dead on Tuesday. *(Reuters)*

FOOTBALL

AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023: LOC holds first meeting

QNA
Doha



The Local Organizing Committee of AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, which is slated to be hosted by Qatar during the period from Jan. 12, 2024, to Feb. 10, 2024, convened its meeting at Qatar Football Association's headquarters in Al Bidda Tower.

President of Qatar Football Association **Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani** chaired the meeting in the presence of Deputy President of Qatar Football Association Jassim Rashid Al Buenain, members of the committee, including Ahmed Abdulaziz al-Buainain, Ibrahim Khalil al-Muhannadi, Hani Talib Ballan, QFA Secretary-General and General Manager of the tournament Mansour Mohamed al-Ansari, along with Chief Executive Officer of the tournament Jassim Abdulaziz al-Jassim.

The meeting discussed all items on the agenda with respect to the current stage of preparations to organize the tournament, as well as the most crucial steps to hold one of the most important continental championships for national teams Qatar will host in January 2024.

In addition, the meeting discussed all matters related to hosting this tournament, including stadiums and hotels, as well as marketing and media issues, along with all matters pertaining to the tournament, in terms of logistic and tournament operations aspects in order to organize a successful version of AFC Asian Cup.

SPOTLIGHT

QFA features in AFC coach conference

QNA
Kuala Lumpur



The Qatar Football Association (QFA) is participating in the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Coach Education Conference in the Malaysian capital city of Kuala Lumpur under the theme of "Educating Tomorrow's Coaches".

Returning for the first time since 2019, the conference concluded yesterday, with the participation of the most renowned experts, not only in Asia, but from around the world to share their ideas on the best ways to develop coach education programs. The QFA was represented by Director of the Development Department **Fahad Thani Al Zaraa**. The conference deals with Coach Education being among the key technical pillars of the AFC in its pursuit of developing football at all levels on the Continent as well as ways to develop preparation programs and courses for local coaches in Asian federations.

The QFA is among the most advanced Asian federations in the field of developing coaches, as it has a joint education agreement with the AFC since November 2019. The QFA's model of education and development has received great interest from other associations and many requests were received to join coaches' courses - including courses of professional coaches - from friendly associations. Fahad Thani said that the Asian football has witnessed a clear evolution in recent years and the future looks bright, adding coaches must keep abreast of the latest developments in order to build on them for future generations.

FOCUS

Doha forum to analyze FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 technical insights

QNA
Zurich



The FIFA announced yesterday that Doha will host the Coaches Forum which will be held on May 8-9, 2023.

A statement on its website said: "The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 is due to take center stage in Doha again on 8 and 9 May 2023 in the Coaches Forum, to which the head coaches and technical directors of the 32 participating member associations have been invited. The aim of the forum is to exchange technical insights, views and knowledge of Qatar 2022, while also providing a platform to engage in discussions around world football's flagship event.

"Qatar 2022 was an exceptional tournament on the pitch from both the technical and tactical points of view. This post-FIFA World Cup 2022 forum will allow us to perform a collaborative review of the competition by sharing the findings of FIFA's technical analysis," said FIFA Chief of Global Football Development, **Arsene Wenger**.

"We want to combine this with input from the coaches of the participating member associations as a sounding board for the future of the game.

"We will also share and exchange key insights into refereeing and competition aspects," added Wenger.

The Coaches Forum will also feature a session in which the FIFA Technical Study Group will present its technical and tactical assessment of the World Cup, including key statistics and data.

Wenger said: "By organising this forum and providing key content via the FIFA Training Centre, we ensure a sound knowledge transfer, which is very much in line with FIFA's objective of making the most out of the World Cup in educational terms for the benefit of technicians in our member associations."

FIFA World Cup-winning coach Lionel Scaloni will be interviewed on stage to share his thoughts on, and evaluation of, the tournament with all the coaches and technical directors.

CRICKET

Chakravarthy, Rinku sparkle as Kolkata beat Hyderabad in IPL

AFP
Hyderabad

Indian spinner Varun Chakravarthy defended eight runs in the last over of Sunrisers Hyderabad's chase to seal a five-run victory for Kolkata Knight Riders in the IPL yesterday.

Hyderabad, led by South African star Aiden Markram, who scored a 40-ball 41, controlled the chase of their 172-run target until his dismissal when the team still needed 27 runs off 19 balls.

Fellow South African Heinrich Klaasen, who scored a 20-ball 36 with three sixes, stabilised the innings after they lost three quick wickets at the start.

They were reeling at 53-3 in the sixth over after out-of-form India opener Mayank Agarwal (18), his partner Abhishek Sharma (9) and Rahul Tripathi (20) failed to convert their starts.

England sensation Harry Brook failed to open his account, leaving Sunrisers at 54-4 before the two South Africans struck up a 70-run partnership.

Markram's dismissal in the 17th over to Indian rookie pacer Vaibhav Arora changed the game as Hyderabad's lower-order only reached 166-8 in their 20 overs.

Chakravarthy, who bowled some of the toughest overs of the innings and still finished with 1-20, won player-of-the-match for his four-over spell.

West Indian all-rounder Andre Russell, Arora and India's Shardul Thakur took five wickets between them.

Earlier, Nitish Rana-led Kolkata lost wickets at regular intervals.

Both openers, Afghanistan's Rahmanullah Gurbaz (0) and England's Jason Roy (20) fell early.

In-form Venkatesh Iyer fell for seven and the innings was stabilised by Rana (42) and IPL rising star Rinku Singh, who hit a 35-ball 46 before his dismissal by pacer T Natarajan.

Hyderabad's two left-arm pacers - Natarajan and South Africa's Marco Jansen - and India swing veteran Bhuvneshwar Kumar took five wickets between them in tight spells for their team.

Russell smashed two sixes in a 15-ball 24.

"I thought we played good cricket for a large portion of that game but unfortunately in the crunch times we got it wrong," said Markram.

"So it's a difficult one to swallow."

Player of the Match Chakaravarthy said yesterday: "My heartbeat was definitely touching 200 (beats per minute) but I just wanted to challenge them on the longer end so that was my plan.

Chakaravarthy added: "Definitely the ball was slipping a lot and so my best bet was the longer side. That was the only thing in my mind. My first over went for 12 and Markram played some amazing shots." Kolkata remain eighth in the 10-team table, one place above Sunrisers.



Kolkata Knight Riders' Rinku Singh plays a shot during the IPL match against Sunrisers Hyderabad in Hyderabad yesterday. *(AFP)*

BRIEF SCORES

Kolkata Knight Riders 171 for 9 (Rinku 46, N Rana 42, Jansen 2-24, Natarajan 2-30) **beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 166 for 8** (Markram 41, Klaasen 36, Thakur 2-23, Arora 2-32) **by five runs**

TENNIS

Sabalenka reaches final as Karatsev stuns Zhang

'I THINK IT WAS MY BEST MATCH OF THE TOURNAMENT'





Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka in action during her semi-final against Greece's Maria Sakkari at the Madrid Open yesterday. **Right:** Russia's Aslan Karatsev returns the ball to China's Zhang Zhizhen during their Madrid Open quarter-final yesterday. *(Reuters/AFP)*

Agencies
Madrid

Aryna Sabalenka overpowered No.9 seed Maria Sakkari, 6-4, 6-1 in yesterday's semi-finals to advance to the championship match at the Madrid Open for the second time in the past three years.

Sabalenka, the 2021 champion in Madrid, awaits the winner of the second semi-final between No.1 seed Iga Swiatek and No.12 seed Veronika Kudermetova.

Sabalenka is bidding for a fifth career WTA 1000 title in her sixth appearance in a final at this level, her 13th career title overall and her third title of 2023.

Sabalenka extended her head-to-head advantage against Sakkari to 6-3 in 1 hour and 25 minutes, beating the Greek in straight sets for the fifth time.

From 3-3 in the opening set, Sabalenka won nine of the last 11 games in the match, including the last five.

After the match, Sabalenka had high praise for her own performance.

"I think it was my best match of the tournament," she said. "I started really well. Then Maria came back. But mentally I was staying really strong. I knew that she's going to fight for every point. It didn't, how to say, didn't destroy me that she came back. I was still playing, I was still fighting for every point.

"Yeah, I'm super happy with the level that I played, and especially with my mental game, I would say. I'm more happy with my mental game.

Qualifier Karatsev ends Zhang's superb run in Madrid

Aslan Karatsev reached his first ATP Masters 1000 semi-final at the Mutua Madrid Open yesterday when he overcame China's Zhang Shizhen 7-6 (3), 6-4 to become the second qualifier to advance to the last four in tournament history.

In an intriguing clash between two first-time Masters 1000 quarter-finalists, it was Karatsev who held his nerve at key moments inside Manolo Santana Stadium.

The 29-year-old saved all three break points he faced in the first set and produced a clean-hitting display in the second set to triumph after one hour and 40 minutes.

"I am happy with my condition. Back to the top level," Karatsev said. "Playing well and feeling well. From the qualifying, match by match, it has got harder, so mentally you have to be there more. Because your opponent doesn't give you any free points so you have to be there yourself. The important thing is now recover well."

Having dropped as low as No. 129 in the Pepperstone ATP Rankings on 17 April, Karatsev has refound his best form in Madrid, defeating seeded players Botic van de Zandschulp, Alex de Minaur and Daniil Medvedev.

Playing with confidence against Zhang, Karatsev stuck his groundstrokes aggressively in the fast conditions, hitting 29 winners to improve to 1-1 in his ATP Head2Head series against Zhang. With his ninth tour-level win of the year, Karatsev has jumped to No. 51 in the Pepperstone ATP Live Rankings.

"I started the year inside the Top 100 then I dropped and lost some matches. You have to keep going and believe and I have a team behind me that is always supporting me and believing in me," Karatsev said.

The qualifier will aim to continue his run when he takes on fourth-seeded Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas or German lucky loser Jan-Lennard Struff in the semi-finals. Former World No. 14 Karatsev has a history of producing on the big stage. At the 2021 Australian Open, he moved past seeds Diego Schwartzman, Felix Auger-Aliassime and Grigor Dimitrov to become the first man to reach the semi-finals on Grand Slam debut.

History-making Zhang was the first Chinese man to reach the quarter-finals at an ATP Masters 1000. The 26-year-old earned upset wins against Denis Shapovalov, Cameron Norrie and Taylor Fritz in the Spanish capital to advance to his third tour-level quarter-final.

He leaves the clay-court event up 33 spots to No. 66 in the Pepperstone ATP Live Rankings.

GOLF

Europe captain Donald sad to be without LIV trio for Ryder Cup

Reuters
London

Europe's Ryder Cup captain Luke Donald expressed his sadness yesterday that Lee Westwood, Ian Poulter and Sergio Garcia will be unavailable for the team but insisted his side could yet triumph against the United States.

The experienced trio have all been deemed ineligible for this year's edition of the biennial team golf contest in Rome in September after quitting the European Tour, having joined the Saudi-backed breakaway LIV Golf circuit.

"It's sad we've got to this point but this was always a possibility," Donald told the *BBC* yesterday.

"I played with all three and they've been stalwarts of, and given a lot to, both the Ryder Cup and European Tour."

The 45-year-old Englishman, bidding to guide Europe to their first Ryder Cup success since 2018, added: "I have a little more clarity now. I know they're not an option to play in, or be any part of my team. It is a shame."

Former world number one Westwood, 2017 Masters champion Garcia and Poulter have 53 European Tour victories between them.

Last month, the European Tour won its legal battle with rebels, including the English trio of Westwood, Poulter and Richard Bland, after the players appealed against punishments the tour wanted to impose on those who took part in the inaugural LIV event last year.

The case arose when players requested releases to play in the LIV Golf event at the Centurion Club in England in June.

Those requests were denied but the players competed regardless and were fined £100,000 ($125,000) and suspended from the Scottish Open and two other events.

Earlier, the 50-year-old Westwood, regarded as one of the best golfers of his generation never to have won one of golf's four major championships, said he had paid the fine in a bid to "move on".



A detailed view of a bag used by Nick Hardy during the first round of the Wells Fargo Championship in Quail Hollow Club in Charlotte, New Carolina, yesterday. *(USA TODAY Sports)*

But he accused the European Tour of becoming a "feeder" event for the US PGA Tour, the sport's other major circuit, as he criticised established golf's response to the emergence of LIV.

Donald, who was appointed captain only after Henrik Stenson was dismissed for joining LIV, will now be without three of Europe's most successful Ryder Cup golfers in Italy.

Westwood has featured as a player a record 11 times, Poulter is unbeaten in singles across his seven appearances and Spanish star Garcia is Europe's all-time record points scorer.

But Donald was adamant he still had "plenty of great golfers" to look at and pick from. "There's great momentum with European golf," he said.

"We've already had seven winners in the US (this season) and a bunch of people who haven't played in the Ryder Cup have played great this year on the DP World (European) Tour so I'm excited about the make-up of this team."

Patrick Cantlay hasn't talked to Tiger Woods about hiring caddie Joe LaCava

It would appear Patrick Cantlay has yet to speak to his new caddie's former employer.

After hiring Joe LaCava, who had tended Tiger Woods' bag since 2011, Cantlay said ahead of the Wells Fargo Championship in Charlotte, North Carolina, that he did not speak to Woods about the decision, but it's one that he is pleased with.

"I've been friends with Fred Couples a long time; he's been in Newport Beach (California) for a number of years now and we've played a lot of golf together, so I've heard a number of great things about Joe," Cantlay said. "You know, when I reached out to Joe, he said it was possible and ended up working out, and I'm really happy about it."

LaCava and Woods shared 11 victories, including the 2019 Masters. LaCava also caddied for Couples for 22 years.

Cantlay recently parted ways with veteran caddie Matt Minister, who was with the eight-time PGA Tour winner since 2017. Minister was on Cantlay's bag for all eight of his wins.

MOTORSPORT

Miami GP offers F1 chance to dismiss 'boring' fears



Max Verstappen of the Netherlands and Oracle Red Bull Racing looks on in the Paddock ahead of the Grand Prix of Miami at International Autodrome in Miami, Florida. *(AFP)*

AFP
Miami Gardens, US

The dreaded word 'boring' has been reappearing in the vocabulary of Formula One, after a season dominated so far by defending champions Red Bull, so it is perhaps timely that the championship arrives in Miami this week.

Last year's inaugural Miami Grand Prix encapsulated the buzz around the sport in the United States with celebrities and socialites keen to be seen with mojitos in hand watching the stars of Netflix's 'Drive to Survive'.

The impact of the reality show on F1's growth in the US has been well documented and this season sees three Grand Prix races in the country with Las Vegas added to the calendar alongside the US Grand Prix in Austin, Texas.

But Americans are used to sports where rules and structures are put in place to stop the same teams dominating, with parity one of the great appeals of the NFL in particular, and the current domination of Red Bull represents an obvious risk to the country's embrace of F1.

The four races in 2023 have all been won by Red Bull with two victories apiece for world champion and current championship leader Max Verstappen and his team-mate Sergio Perez.

After last week's Azerbaijan Grand Prix, which saw Perez on top of the podium ahead of his Dutch team-mate, Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff provided a warning about the races becoming "boring."

"It was not a thriller. No overtaking, even with a big pace difference, made it not great entertainment....we need to look at how we can avoid a boring race," he said.

Mercedes and Ferrari are struggling to match the Red Bull cars, forming a chasing pack along with Aston Martin.

"We see a pattern. There are two Red Bulls, and then there are six cars, and a long way off is the third division. That has been the pattern the first four races and we have to shake that up somehow," said Wolff.

The Red Bull supremacy does however contain its own competition with Perez so far free to compete with Verstappen with 'team orders' yet to rear their head and just six points separating the pair.

"They both want to win, which is why they're employed by the team," said Red Bull team principal Christian Horner.

"And I think that it's down to what they do on the track. They were free to race today and, all year so far, they've been free."

Horner said that will remain the case, certainly until much later in the campaign.

"Yes, until the team's interests, if you're competing against a competitor, becomes bigger than the drivers' interests. But, as it is at the moment, they're free to race," he said.

Verstappen won last year's race in Miami, after a thrilling battle with Ferrari's Charles Leclerc but there were complaints about the surface on the new track built around the Hard Rock Stadium, home of the NFL's Miami Dolphins.

Organisers have resurfaced the entire track and hope that the new material will encourage overtaking but the layout of the track remains the same, including the tight chicane area.

There are other alterations, in response to some of the teething problems from the maiden Grand Prix at the venue.

Most noticeably, some real 'water features' have been added to the 'Marina' area that received plenty of social media mocking for it's fake scene of yachts parked on blue plastic.

Another change is to the paddock area which was packed last year with VIP guests often getting in the way of team staff and mechanics.

The new set-up sees the paddock moved into the stadium on to the football field itself where fans will be able to view the going-ons from the stand.

On the track, the Miami fans will have a local favourite to cheer for this time with rookie American Logan Sargeant of Williams, born and raised in South Florida, searching for his first points.

Oklahoma native Talor Gooch red hot entering LIV Golf Tulsa

Oklahoma: All momentum will be on **Talor Gooch**'s side when he gets to relish in the comforts of home at LIV Golf Tulsa. Gooch, a native of Midwest City, Okla., is coming off back-to-back victories at LIV Golf Adelaide and LIV Golf Singapore as the Saudi-backed tour pivots to Cedar Ridge Country Club this weekend.

"I have such a love for Oklahoma. It's my people, I feel like. I'm just excited for them to actually see it up close and in person. It's going to be such an exciting week," Gooch said. "I keep hearing about the support has been really good for ticket sales and just the local community. We love our sports in Oklahoma, and it's going to be fun to see the turnout."

And if there's any such thing as home-field advantage in golf, Gooch will have it at Tulsa.

"Man, I've got so many family and friends that are going to be there all week. I can't even begin to count," Gooch said. "Yeah, the Gooch gang that week will be deep."

Gooch also has some familiarity with Cedar Ridge, where he played the US Amateur Championship in 2009.

"I remember thinking it was a big-boy course at the time. I know it's still revered as one of the best courses in Oklahoma, so I'm just hopeful we're going to have some good weather," Gooch said. "This time of year in Oklahoma, it can get a little windy, so us golfers know when it gets windy, it gets tough. Hoping we get a little Oklahoma wind that week."

While Gooch might have the support of his family and friends, he will still have to try to win over the crowd as a whole, as Eugenio Chacarra, Matthew Wolff, Peter Uihlein and Charles Howell III all have ties to the Sooner State thanks to their time at Oklahoma State. Abraham Ancer will also look to garner support after his spending his collegiate career at Oklahoma.

"Man, we're all going to be crowd favourites. We love our sports. We love supporting our own. Eugenio and Wolffy and Charles and Peter and me, it's going to be great," Gooch said.

WORLD JUDO CHAMPIONSHIPS DOHA 2023

We look forward to a week of exciting judo: Sheikh Joaan

'QATAR'S INNOVATION AND COMMITMENT TO SPORT HAVE MADE IT A LEADING COUNTRY IN THE FIELD'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The President of Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani yesterday addressed the International Judo Federation's (IJF) Ordinary Congress, saying fans in Qatar are looking forward to the start of the World Judo Championships Doha 2023.

Ali Bin Hamad al-Attiyah Arena, a multipurpose indoor sports facility next to the iconic Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, will host the May 7 to 14 World Judo Championships Doha 2023.

"We welcome you all to Doha for the International Judo Federation (IJF) World Congress before the start of the World Judo Championships. We wish you all a productive meeting and look forward to a week of exciting competitions at the World Judo Championships," Sheikh Joaan said in his speech yesterday at Doha Sheraton Hotel.

"We are very happy to be celebrating this special occasion with you. It is a moment we have been waiting for many years and it is now finally here.

"We wish you and your athletes the best of luck and we hope this is an event that showcases the best of youth. In the meantime we hope you enjoy your stay in Doha and that you get the chance to experience what our city has to offer," the QOC president said.



Qatar Olympic Committee President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani attends the IJF Ordinary Congress in Doha yesterday.

IJF president Marius Vizer said: "We are honoured to welcome His Excellency Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, to the IJF congress and are grateful for his support for sport, unity, and peace." He added in a tweet: "Qatar's innovation and commitment to sport have made it a leading country in the field. Investing in sport is investing in education, stability, unity, friendship and peace. Qatar is contributing with a legacy on a global level."

Vlad Marinescu, the IJF Director General, said during the Congress: "The development of growth within the judo family relies on a bigger funnel; this is imperative. All the work that we have undertaken has been to grow our base."


Qatar Olympic Committee President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani meets International Judo Federation president Marius Vizer in Doha yesterday.

He added: "With this in mind, we have launched Judo TV as our own proprietary platform to watch all the live events and the full archive of historical events. It can be viewed via free access or with premium gold access and all information and coverage is loaded on to our IT system, owned by the IJF and shared with the continental unions and national federations. Judo is moving into the list of top sports for viewing. The New Technologies and High Performance Commission has helped to innovate and make this all possible.

There are now 600,000 members with IJF accounts and we expect substantial growth from this point, during the remainder of 2023. There are 196 clubs involved in the No Borders programme, with clubs offering free judo to refugees around the world. This successful programme allows us to share our values with those in need.

SERIE A

Napoli clinch first title in 33 years after Udinese draw

AFP
Udine, Italy

Napoli finally ended their long wait to win Italy's Serie A yesterday after a 1-1 draw at Udinese secured their third league title with a record-equalling five games to play.

Thousands of fans in Udine, at the Stadio Maradona in Naples and all around southern Italy's biggest city exploded with joy at the final whistle as 33 years of waiting came to an end.

Supporters streamed onto the pitch at the Dacia Arena to celebrate after a season dominated by Luciano Spalletti's side, creating moments of tension with home fans not happy at such open partying on their ground.

Victor Osimhen scored the decisive goal as Napoli's current stars came back from trailing to Sandi Lovric's opener at half-time and emulated the teams led by Diego Maradona which won the league in 1987 and 1990.

Spalletti and his squad will receive an emotional welcome when they return to Naples, where the partying is set to continue to until at least their next home fixture against Fiorentina on Sunday evening.

It was appropriate that Osimhen was the man to take Napoli over the line as the Nigeria striker has had the best season of his career and been key to Napoli's historic charge to glory.

Osimhen's title-deciding strike was his 22nd goal in 28 league appearances and rightly caused bedlam among the massed ranks of away fans who took over Udine. Napoli's 16-point lead over second-placed Lazio leaves them with a month-long parade between now and the end of the season which will allow their long-suffering supporters to fully unload more than a generation of frustration. Napoli were straight on the front foot but as on Sunday looked worryingly bereft of ideas in the final third, and the away side were stunned in the 13th minute following the first spell of play in Udinese's favour.


Napoli's Victor Osimhen celebrates after scoring an equaliser during the Italian Serie A match against Udinese at Friuli Stadium in Udine yesterday. *(AFP)*

Lovric was given the freedom of the penalty area after being fed by Destiny Udogie, and the Slovenia midfielder took advantage by placing a lovely shot in the top corner.

Lovric stung the fingers of former Udine youth product Alex Meret in the Napoli goal just after the half-hour mark, by which point Napoli hadn't created a single goalscoring opportunity. Seconds later Osimhen, who looked like Napoli's only hope of scoring in the opening period, headed a deep cross just the wrong side of the post.

And in the 52nd minute the 24-year-old stepped up as so often he has this season to unleash a wave of relief and blue smoke from the stands with his 27th goal in all competitions.

Osimhen was on hand to ram home the leveller when, after a corner, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia's low shot was blocked and fell to the clinical striker. He had the ball in the net again in the 67th minute but was denied by referee Rosario Abisso who rightly whistled for a foul by Eljif Elmas.

But by that point the fans grew ever more sure that Thursday night would be the night, chanting victory songs in Udine while flares billowed and fireworks were set off at the other end of the country. While fans had to be cleared from the pitch in Udine to avoid clashes with home supporters the Stadio Maradona was lit up by phones and held by teary-eyed Neapolitans singing along to songs by late local singer-songwriter Pino Daniele.

PSG boosts security after protests target Neymar, Messi

Paris Saint-Germain have ordered extra security at the club's training ground and at the homes of Lionel Messi and Neymar after protests by fans angry over recent results at the Ligue 1 leaders, sources close to the club told AFP yesterday.

Several hundred PSG supporters gathered outside club headquarters on Wednesday evening where they set off smoke flares and sang hostile chants about underperforming stars Messi, Neymar and Italian midfielder Marco Verratti. Some of them, dressed in black, then travelled to Neymar's home in a wealthy suburb west of Paris where they chanted "Neymar, get lost".

"Paris Saint-Germain condemns in the strongest possible terms the unacceptable and insulting actions of a small group of individuals," a club statement said.

"Whatever the differences of opinion, nothing justifies such behaviour." Neymar, who has been plagued by injuries at PSG and is out until the end of the season, reacted by writing on Instagram: "Don't let people put you in their storm. Put them in your peace."

The club decided to boost security at its training ground and outside the homes of the players singled out during the protests, two sources told AFP, asking not to be named. *(AFP)*

QNB STARS LEAGUE

Al Duhail made to wait for title after loss to Al Sadd


Al Sadd's Akram Afif (right) celebrates with teammate after scoring against Al Duhail in their QNB Stars League match yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

A terrific Al Sadd put Al Duhail's title celebrations on hold after a thrilling 3-1 win over their arch rivals in the QNB Stars League yesterday.

At the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium, Duhail needed a point to wrap up the title but the reigning champions Sadd denied them glory at their expense with Baghdad Bounedjah, Akram Afif and Rodrigo Tabata among the scoresheets.

Despite the loss to Sadd, Duhail could have sealed the title yesterday if second-placed Arabi had not won against Al Gharafa. But Arabi kept their title hopes alive thanks to Omar al-Somah's hat-trick at the Grand Hamad Stadium.

Duhail, though, still have a two-point advantage over Arabi and are still favourites to lift the Falcon Shield after a gap of two seasons.

The Red Knights meet ninth-placed Al Shamal in their final game on May 8, while Arabi are up against the might of Sadd on the same day.

With equal number of 15 wins for the two side, Al Duhail currently hold the advantage of four goals in goal difference over Al Arabi in case both teams end in a tie.

Yesterday, needing a victory to secure an unassailable lead, Al Duhail got off to a strong start in front of home fans. They missed several chances including a hit over the bar from a close range by Karim Boudiaf following a long ball from Mohamed Musa in 16th minute.

Al Sadd earned the lead through Baghdad Bounedjah's brilliance as he deceived two defenders to put the ball past Al Duhail goalkeeper Salah Zakaria in 41st minute.

Akram Afif lobbed past Zakaria to doubled the advantage for Al Sadd in 51st minute with Rodrigo Tabata sealing the victory for the Wolves after Michael Olunga pulled one back by converting a penalty in 73rd minute.

Al Sadd received a late setback with a red card to Tarek Salman in 88th minute but they went happy after moving to 44 points as a win over Al Arabi would earn them a second place finish.

Meanwhile, Al Somah was fabulous for Younes Ali's Al Arabi netting a second half hat-trick with goals in 69th, 78th (pen) and 90th minute.

The defeat ended Al Gharafa's hopes of a top-four finish as they slipped to sixth with 32 points as Qatar SC took their tally to 35 points after a 2-0 win over Al Ahli in yesterday's first match at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium.

Shojae Khalilzadeh own goal put Qatar SC ahead before a Javier Pastore (45+1 minutes) goal just before the interval ensured win for the side.

Qatar SC is now in a two-way battle for the fourth spot against Al Wakrah, who lead them by a point.