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Kohli, Klaasen both hit tons but Bangalore cruise to win



**TENNIS | Page 3**

Medvedev crushes Hanfmann to reach semis



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**FOOTBALL**

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TENNIS

# Nadal pulls out of French Open, set to finish career in 2024

‘It’s not a decision I’m taking, it’s a decision my body is taking. The injury I suffered in Australia has not healed’

AFP  
Manacor, Spain

Rafael Nadal yesterday withdrew from the French Open because his hip injury has failed to heal and said he expects 2024 to be his final year in professional tennis. It will be the first time since he made his Roland Garros debut in 2005 that the 36-year-old Spanish player will miss the claycourt major that he has won a record 14 times.

“It’s not a decision I’m taking, it’s a decision my body is taking,” Nadal said at a news conference in his native Mallorca. Nadal said he was taking a few months off, without training, meaning he will also definitely miss Wimbledon and most likely the US Open, before starting to play again.

And he said next year would bring down the curtain on a career that has so far produced 22 Grand Slam singles titles. “It’s probably going to be my last year on the professional tour, I can’t say this 100 percent because you never know what’s going to happen,” he said. “The injury I suffered in Australia has not healed as we hoped. Roland Garros became impossible. I will not be there after many years, with everything that (tournament) means to me.”

Nadal said he would not set a date for his return, but indicated the Davis Cup in November could be a potential target. The Spaniard said it was important to step away from the game in order to come back next year and say goodbye by playing at his favourite events.

“If I keep playing in this moment, I don’t think I can make next year,” said Nadal. “My idea and motivation is to try to enjoy and try to say goodbye to all the tournaments that have been important to me.”



Rafael Nadal gestures as he speaks during a press conference at his academy in Manacor, Spain, yesterday. (AFP)

Nadal is hopeful that by taking a complete break, his body can recover. “I will stop, I won’t train, it’s been months of frustration – there’s a moment that one has to put the brakes on,” he explained. “It’s time to see if the body can regenerate itself over these months.”

He said he was philosophical about not being able to defend his title at the tournament he has dominated. “Roland Garros will always be Roland Garros,

with or without me, it will keep being the best event,” added Nadal. “There will be a Roland Garros champion and it won’t be me, and that’s life.”

His fellow Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz, the 20-year-old who will take over from Novak Djokovic as world number one next week, said Nadal’s announcement was “very painful and sad for everyone”. “But I hope that 2024 will be a great season for you and that you can

say goodbye like the great champion you are!” Alcaraz added.

Former world number one Nadal has not played since the Australian Open in January where he picked up a hip injury in a shock second round loss to Mackenzie McDonald of the United States. He was expected to recover inside six weeks, comfortably in time to launch an assault on a record-extending 15th title at Roland Garros.

However, with his 37th birthday little over two weeks away and having skipped Masters events in Indian Wells, Miami, Monte Carlo, Madrid and Rome, Nadal is stepping away to try and find fitness. After a career plagued by knee, wrist and foot injuries in particular, the alarm bells have been ringing ever louder over the last year.

His undefeated start to 2022, which saw him pick up a second Australian

**NADAL FACTFILE**

**Date of birth:** June 3, 1986  
**Place of birth:** Manacor, Spain  
**Professional debut:** 2001  
**Career earnings:** \$134.6mn (123mn euros)

**CAREER**

**ATP titles:** 92  
**Grand Slams:** 22  
**Australian Open (two titles):** 2009, 2022  
**French Open (14 titles):** 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022  
**Wimbledon (two titles):** 2008, 2010  
**US Open (four titles):** 2010, 2013, 2017, 2019  
**Olympic gold:** 2008 (singles), 2016 (doubles)  
**Davis Cup (five titles):** 2004, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2019

Open title, ended with a chest injury at Indian Wells. He swept to a 14th French Open last June but only after revealing he had required daily pain-killing injections in his foot.

Weeks later, his dream of a third Wimbledon title ended in a semi-final withdrawal due to an abdominal strain. Nadal’s lengthy absence this year has also seen him drop out of the world’s top 10 for the first time in 18 years. Since his 2005 championship-winning debut at the French Open, he has racked up 112 wins and only been defeated three times.

Two of those losses came against Djokovic in 2015 and 2021. The other was to Robin Soderling in 2009. Djokovic, who shares the men’s record of 22 Slams with Nadal, will start as favourite in Paris this year alongside Alcaraz.

MIDDLE EAST RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

# Al-Attiyah to launch defence of ‘special’ Jordan Rally today



Qatar’s Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah has won the Jordan Rally 15 times.

By Sports Reporter  
Dead Sea, Jordan

Special stage action in the Jordan Rally, round three of the 2023 FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC), gets underway in the Dead Sea and Jordan Valley areas of the Hashemite Kingdom today morning.

Competitors were flagged away from a spectacular ceremonial start adjacent to the Dead Sea in the grounds of the Dead Sea Marriott Resort and Spa yesterday evening.

Twenty-three crews and competitors from six nations had completed their reconnaissance of the special stages on Wednesday afternoon and are relishing the two-day challenge ahead. Seventeen are eligible for the FIA event and a further six will only be able to score points for the National Championship.

Pre-event favourite and 15-time event winner Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah said: “Jordan is a special rally for me. It was where I came at the very start of my career and I have a good record on this rally. I enjoy the stages. They are very challenging and a pleasure to drive.

The Qatari legend added: “We made a good test, a short one on Wednesday, but had no issues with the car. We know these stages very well and know that you have to be careful in some places.”

Abdullah al-Rawahi won the opening round of the MERC in Oman in his Skoda Fabia R5 before retiring from round two in Qatar with an engine failure. The Omani is hoping to push al-Attiyah all the way this weekend.

He said: “We have worked on the details of the set-up to adapt it to my driving style and it is going really well. We had the pace in Oman. That was something positive to take. We were in Jordan about three weeks’ back and won the national event. We were preparing for this rally.

“Me and Ata (Al-Hmoud) worked really hard on the notes and the times on the stages were really good on the local rally. I think we are coming in really strong on this rally and will try to be close to Nasser. If we can challenge him, it will be really nice for us and the spectators.”

Before the ceremonial start, al-Attiyah was joined at the pre-event press conference by title rival al-Rawahi, MERC2 front-runners Meshari al-Thefiri, Roger Feghali, Shaker Jweihan, last year’s FIA MERC2 champion Issa Abu Jamous and veteran Ziad Miqdad, who will retire from the sport after this event.

Today, three special stages will be used twice on day one before a short stage at the Dead Sea.

The timed competition gets underway with a run through the 9.49km Yakrut stage (first car – 09.29hrs) that carves its way across winding off-road trails to the left of the main desert link road between Amman and the Dead Sea hotel area.

The mammoth Jordan River stage of 40.79km (first car – 10.42hrs) is next on the agenda close to the frontier with the West Bank and the surface has benefitted from a lack of rain in the last few weeks. The loop is completed by a run through the Baptism Site stage of 11.34km (first car – 11.45hrs).

The three specials are then repeated from 13.31hrs, 14.44hrs and 15.47hrs, respectively, after a return to the Dead Sea for a lunchtime regroup and service. The day’s action concludes with a short 3.48km special stage close to the Dead Sea from 16.30hrs.

**START LIST**

1. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Mathieu Baumel (AND), Volkswagen Polo GTI R5; 2. Abdullah al-Rawahi (OMN)/Ata al-Hmoud (JOR), Skoda Fabia Evo; 3. Roger Feghali (LEB)/Joseph Matar (LEB), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 4. Shaker Jweihan (JOR)/Taha al-Zadjali (OMN), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 5. Meshari al-Thefiri (KWT)/Nasser al-Kuwari (QAT), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 6. Ameer Nassif (JOR)/Mohamed Attari (JOR) Subaru Impreza; 7. Issa Abu Jamous (JOR)/Ghassan Zawaideh (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 9. Shadi Shaban (JOR)/Samer Issa (JOR), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 10. Ahmad Khaled (LEB)/Joseph Kmeid (LEB), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 11. Sheikh Bader al-Fayez (JOR)/Emad Juma (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 12. Sami Fleifel (JOR)/Samer Sfeir (LEB), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 13. Ihab al-Shorafa (JOR)/Yousef Juma (JOR), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 14. Yousef al-Dhafeeri (KWT)/Carlos Hanna (LEB), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 15. Zakariya al-Aamri (OMN)/Mohamed al-Mazroui (OMN) Subaru Impreza; 17. Mustafa al-Atari (JOR)/Zeid Abu Zaid (JOR), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 19. Fadi Dahshan (JOR)/Yazan Juma (JOR), Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 20. Salem al-Dhafeeri (KWT)/Fares al-Thefiri (KWT), Subaru Impreza



CYCLING

# Germany’s Denz wins a hilly stage at the Giro

AFP  
Rivoli, Italy

Germany’s Nico Denz of the Bora Hansgrohe team won a hilly stage 12 of the Giro d’Italia yesterday as Geraint Thomas safely defended the overall leader’s pink jersey.

Denz and a clutch of cohorts covered the route from Bra to Rivoli a good eight minutes faster than the main peloton which was led over the finish line by Ineos rider Pavel Sivakov, showing his fall on Wednesday had no profound effect.

“I’m over the moon,” said Denz, who revealed he had long planned to win this stage that after a mass breakaway came down to a three up sprint in downtown Rivoli.

“I prepared that stage actually. I had it in my mind already before, but I also have quite a fast finish and that saved me in the end,” said Denz, racing his sixth Giro d’Italia.

In the overall classification Thomas remains two seconds ahead of new race favourite Primoz Roglic, who might be expected to do far better than the Welshman in the upcoming mountains.

And lurking with intent in third place is Joao Almeida of Team UAE Emirates just 22

seconds behind Thomas. With the Giro losing 40 of the original 176 riders already and nine stages remaining Ineos lost 2020 Giro champion Tao Geoghegan Hart to a fall on Wednesday, but their leader Thomas was delighted with how another faller was faring, Pavel Sivakov.

“It was a great sign to see (Pavel riding). He rode on the front from the bottom of the climb all the way to the finish. It must have been close to 40km. He’s certainly looking alright. He’s a battler and a tough guy so it’s great to have him still riding well in the team,” said a relieved overall race leader.

“When we had myself and (Tao) up there it gave us two good options. Obviously he’s not here anymore.

“It’s a blow to the team. We’ve still got a good strong unit here. We’ve had great morale from the start of the year and hopefully we can continue that.”

Today, the Giro veers into Switzerland for a mountain stage that should have been the highest peak on the route but which has been shortened due to avalanche risk.

The race will however take on the Col du Grand-Saint-Bernard for a 13.1km ascent at 7.2 percent gradient and the Croix-de-Coeur climb of 15.4km at 8.8 percent gradient. It will likely change the overall standings and the Al-

pine peaks signal a new phase of the Giro and many ambitions will be broken or achieved in this mountainous final week.

**Stage 12 results:**  
Nico Denz (Bora-hansgrohe) in 4h18’11”  
Toms Skujins (Trek-Segafredo) same time.  
Sebastian Berwick (Israel-Premier Tech) s.t.  
Alessandro Tonelli (Green Project-Bardiani CSF-Faizanè) +58  
Marco Frigo (Israel-Premier Tech) +2’07”  
Ilan Van Wilder (Soudal-QuickStep) +2’20”  
Alberto Bettiol (EF Education-EasyPost) s.t.  
Christian Scaroni (Astana Qazaqstan) s.t.  
Michel Hessmann (Jumbo-Visma) s.t.  
Alex Baudin (AG2R Citroën) s.t.

**General Classification after Stage 12:**  
G Thomas (INEOS Grenadiers) at 49h02’05”  
Primoz Roglic (Jumbo Visma) at 2  
J Pedro Almeida (UAE Team Emirates) at 22  
Andreas Leknessund (Team DSM) at 35  
Damiano Caruso (Bahrain Victorious) at 1’28”

**Jerseys:**  
M Rosa, leader of General Classification  
M Ciclamino, leader of Points Classification  
M Zzurra, leader of the Gran Premio della Montagna  
M Bianca, Best Young Rider,



Hansgrohe’s German rider Nico Denz celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win, ahead of Trek - Segafredo’s Latvian rider Toms Skujins (left), during the 12th stage of the Giro d’Italia 2023 cycling race, covering 179kms between Bra and Rivoli, yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

# Kohli, Du Plessis power Bangalore to 8-wicket win

Quality centuries by Virat Kohli and Heinrich Klaasen enthral fans in Hyderabad

AFP  
Hyderabad

Former India captain Virat Kohli smashed a masterful century as his Royal Challengers Bangalore thumped Sunrisers Hyderabad – for whom South Africa’s Heinrich Klaasen hit a ton of his own – by eight wickets in the IPL yesterday.

It was the first time in Indian Premier League history that both sides have scored a century in a game.

The win leaves Bangalore in control of their own destiny in the race to the play-offs, moving up into the fourth and last qualifying spot.

They are tied with Mumbai Indians on 14 points but have a superior net run rate with one game to go – at home to table-topping Gujarat Titans on Sunday.

Kohli started his innings with two consecutive fours as Bangalore chased the hosts’ 186-5, and went on to hit another 10 boundaries and four sixes.

He brought up his sixth IPL ton – equal top with Chris Gayle – and first since 2019 smashing a six over deep midwicket off Bhuvneshwar Kumar after 62 balls.

The player popularly known as “King Kohli”, but whose form has varied in recent years, raised his bat and fell to his knees in celebration.

He was caught at cow corner on the very next ball attempting another slog.

“My intent from ball one was to go after the bowlers,” he said afterwards. “There was a dip but I wanted to take it up in the right time. Happy that it all came together nicely.

“I’m myself on the field and think it resonates with the people. Great to see people happy when I perform.”

His fellow opener and captain Faf du Plessis fell four balls later having made 71 off 47. He remains the leading scorer in 2023 with 702 runs in 13 outings, and their 172-run partnership gave the duo the most runs in an IPL season for an opening pair.



Royal Challengers Bangalore’s Virat Kohli (right) and Faf du Plessis run between the wickets during the IPL match against Sunrisers Hyderabad in Hyderabad yesterday. (AFP)

It was a bitter disappointment for Klaasen, who brought up his maiden IPL ton after just 49 balls – the second-fastest ever for his bottom-of-the-table franchise – with a six off Harshal Patel.

Two balls later he was out for 104.

“Pretty special feeling, fantastic crowd, glad I got it at home,” said the wicketkeeper-batsman, who hit a 54-ball ODI century for South Africa against West Indies in March.

All the IPL teams have now played 13 games each, with the last round of league matches kicking off today.

Gujarat have 18 points and will finish top.

Chennai Super Kings and Lucknow Super Giants, with 15 points each, are favourites to take two of the remaining qualification spots, but Bangalore can claim second place if they beat Gujarat and other results go their way.

Three other teams – Rajasthan Royals, Kolkata Knight Riders, and Punjab Kings – are on 12 points, and have only mathematical chances of qualifying.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Royal Challengers Bangalore 187 for 2** (Kohli 100, du Plessis 71) **beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 186 for 5** (Klaasen 104, Bracewell 2-13) **by eight wickets**



Sunrisers Hyderabad’s Heinrich Klaasen plays a shot in Hyderabad yesterday.

BADMINTON

# China overpower Denmark at the Sudirman Cup to take top group spot



China’s Chen Yufei hits a return against Denmark’s Line Christophersen during their women’s singles match at the 2023 Sudirman Cup in Suzhou, in China’s eastern Jiangsu province, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Suzhou, China

Hosts China defeated a talented Danish side yesterday to win their group at the Sudirman Cup, propelled by a dominant performance from reigning Olympic women’s badminton champion Chen Yufei.

Despite the setback for Denmark, their two previous wins over Singapore and Egypt will enable them to advance with China to the knockout rounds that begin today.

This year’s edition of the biennial tournament, hosted in the eastern Chinese city of Suzhou, carries extra weight because results count towards qualification for the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Victory was secured for China when Chen beat Denmark’s Line Christophersen 21-8, 21-11 in the women’s singles of the five-match tie.

Reigning champions China are clear favourites to win the trophy again, which they have done a record 12 times since the inaugural tournament in 1989.

Four-time champions South Korea sailed past previous runners-up Japan on Wednesday,

thanks to an impressive performance by women’s world number two An Se-young against top-ranked Akane Yamaguchi.

Denmark, also a strong badminton nation, have been Sudirman Cup runners-up twice.

Denmark’s line-up this year is built around men’s world number one Viktor Axelsen, whose hard-fought win over Singapore’s Loh Kean Yew on Sunday helped his side earn its first win of the competition.

In earlier play yesterday, Thailand edged Indonesia 3-2 to complete an undefeated run in the group stage.

Thailand, whose best Sudirman Cup performances include three third-place finishes in the past five editions of the hugely popular tournament, also defeated Canada 4-1 on Tuesday.

But while Canada bounced back to beat Germany 3-2 yesterday, previous losses meant both teams failed to qualify for the next round.

Match-ups for the week-long event, the first major international sporting event to be held in China since Beijing ditched its tough zero-Covid policies in December, began on Sunday and are scheduled to last for one week.

BOTTOMLINE

# England’s Bairstow expresses sympathy for Foakes after being dropped



Reuters  
London

Jonny Bairstow said he feels sympathy towards fellow wicketkeeper Ben Foakes after he was left out of the England Test squad for the Ashes warm-up against Ireland.

Foakes was dropped to accommodate stumper-batsman Bairstow, who scored six centuries in 2022 before suffering a leg injury in September that kept him out of the Twenty20 World Cup in Australia.

In Bairstow’s absence, Foakes established himself as first choice behind the stumps under coach Brendon McCullum and captain Ben Stokes during the team’s streak of 10 victories in 12 tests.

“I’ve been in that same position previously around getting dropped so I’ve got a huge amount of sympathy for Ben (Foakes) and for anyone really who gets dropped,” Bairstow, who last kept wicket for England in a Test in 2021, told the BBC yesterday.

“He’ll be back I’m sure because in the last 12 months he’s been

a big part of what we’ve been about, he’s been a big part of the group. It’s never an easy decision and never a position you want to be in.”

Former captain Michael Atherton supported the England board’s decision to pick Bairstow over Foakes.

“My own view is that Bairstow is more likely to help England win a match with bat than lose it with gloves. He would be my choice,” Atherton wrote in his column for The Times newspaper.

“It is not hard to imagine the destruction he might cause,

coming in at number seven against an old ball and a tiring attack.”

England will face Ireland at Lord’s on June 1 before the five-Test Ashes series against Australia begins at Edgbaston on June 16.

Bairstow feared he’d ‘never walk again’ after horrific leg injury.

“You wonder whether or not you’ll be able to walk again, jog again, run again, play cricket again,” Bairstow said. “Absolutely, those things do go through your mind. It depends how long you

think about them. There are many different things, until you get back to playing, well... you wonder, is it going to feel the same?”

Reflecting on the emotions when McCullum informed him of his selection, Bairstow said: “I was buzzing. It filled me with a lot of pride again. I’ve said there’s been some dark times this winter and it’s been tough so to get that phone call after all the emotions you go through and everything else this winter...there’s a huge amount of pride that goes into it. Yes, getting that phone call...it was awesome.”





TENNIS

# Medvedev rolls past Hanfmann to reach Rome semis

‘I am feeling great. I said before the tournament I was feeling really great in practice’

Rome  
Reuters

World number three Daniil Medvedev produced a dominant performance against German qualifier Yannick Hanfmann to reach his first Italian Open semi-final, cruising to a 6-2 6-2 victory yesterday.

Medvedev, who has described himself as a “hard court specialist”, had never won a match in Rome before this year’s tournament but has produced some of his best tennis to reach the last four on clay for the first time since Monte Carlo in 2019.

“I am feeling great,” Medvedev said. “I said before the tournament I was feeling really great in practice. “It is always a danger to say this if you lose the first round and you think, ‘Why did I say this? But I am proving it.”

Medvedev soaked up Hanfmann’s powerful hitting and controlled the baseline exchanges, dominating with his big first serve to wrap up the win in an hour and 20 minutes.

“He was struggling more than me and I am happy with the win and being in the semis,” Medvedev said of Hanfmann, who upset Monte Carlo champion Andrey Rublev and ninth seed Taylor Fritz to reach the last eight.

“I knew I had to put as many balls into the court as possible because he plays aggressively.



Russia's Daniil Medvedev returns to Germany's Yannick Hanfmann during their Rome Open quarter-finals yesterday. (AFP)

Maybe he didn’t play his best match but that is how it works... I am happy I could neutralise his attacking style.”

Medvedev will meet either world number five Stefanos Tsitsipas or Croatian Borna Coric, who play their quarter-final

later, as he continues his quest for his fifth title of the season, having triumphed in Rotterdam, Doha, Dubai and Miami.

Medvedev, who lost the epic 2022 Australian Open final to Nadal despite winning the first two sets, said: “It will be the first

Roland Garros without Nadal in I don’t know how long. It opens up possibilities for many players.” He admitted that such is Nadal’s prowess on clay that: “Even if Nadal was not at 100 percent he would still be the favourite if he decided to play.”

Speaking at the Italian Open, the Russian added: “I hope he can come back as fast as possible. He’s an amazing player, one of the best in history.

“I hope he can play some more Slams for as long as he can... we’ll see how it goes.”

## Injury-hit Swiatek’s French Open title defence on knife edge

**PARIS:** French Open champion Iga Swiatek says she will know in the coming days how serious her thigh injury is and whether she can defend her title at Roland Garros which gets underway on Sunday. The 21-year-old world number one retired from Wednesday’s Italian Open quarter-final with Kazakhstan’s Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina. The match was delicately poised at one set apiece and 2-2 in the decider

when the two-time defending champion felt unable to continue. “We’re checking it (the injury),” tweeted the Polish star, who also won the French Open in 2020. “During the second set I got a thigh injury. The diagnostic is in progress. More info in the following days. Will keep you updated.”

Swiatek, the reigning US Open champion, had roared through the first set but after receiving treatment she

called a halt. Meanwhile, Jelena Ostapenko reached the semi-finals in Rome for the first time after holding off a mid-match surge from Paula Badosa to claim a 6-2 4-6 6-3 victory. Ostapenko, the 2017 French Open winner, will face seventh seed Rybakina.

Poland’s Iga Swiatek reacts during her Rome Open quarter-final against Kazakhstan’s Elena Rybakina. (AFP)



MOTORSPORT

## Imola cancellation marks a rare weather defeat for Formula 1

Reuters  
London

Formula One raced through the pandemic and has overcome typhoons and earthquakes but the cancellation of this weekend’s Emilia Romagna Grand Prix due to torrential rain and flooding in northern Italy is a rare defeat.

With little flexibility on a crowded calendar that started off with a record 24 rounds, and now looks likely to end up with 22, the race at Imola is unlikely to find another slot this season. With a contract through 2025, the circuit is in no immediate danger of being dropped. It enjoys strong support from Ferrari and Imola is also the birthplace of Formula One’s chief executive Stefano Domenicali, who worked at the track in his youth.

Local organisers have indicated they will seek an extension to 2026 to compensate for this year’s loss, but the fallout from the extreme weather could make the longer term future less secure, particularly if flooding becomes more frequent in an age of global warming.

Italy is the only European country with two races and Imola, which was off the calendar for 14 years from 2006 to 2020 due largely to financial reasons, stands out by being next to a waterway.

The Santerno river that flows alongside the circuit adds much to the old-school charm but it is also an immovable boundary, restricting what can be done in the way of expansion and modernisation. The death of triple world champion Ayrton Senna at the circuit in 1994 triggered important revisions but the paddock remains cramped and narrow in comparison with palatial facilities in the Middle East and Americas.

With pressure on all sports to reduce their carbon footprints,

Formula One wants to group an expanding number of races by region in future and that limits the ‘weather window’.

The four rounds in the Middle East can only be held early in the season or at the end to avoid peak temperatures while European races are traditionally run from May to the Italian Grand Prix at Monza in September.

There have been exceptions, with the 2000 British Grand Prix held in April when torrential rain turned the car parks into quagmires and shut out tens of thousands of spectators, and the southern hemisphere hosted races in January decades ago.

Organising the calendar, with some races insisting on fixed dates and the sport keen to avoid clashes with other major events, is no easy matter. Pandemic aside, cancellations have been rare and weather-related ones even scarcer with the sport having established protocols to change the schedule in the event of adverse conditions.

In rain-soaked Belgium in 2021 that meant completing only two laps behind the safety car, making it the shortest race ever. The 2011 Bahrain Grand Prix was cancelled after pro-democracy protests and subsequent crackdown, while the 1984 Belgian Grand Prix had to be rescheduled after the track surface disintegrated.

The 1995 Pacific Grand Prix at Japan’s Aida circuit was shifted from April to October due to an earthquake and typhoons have long affected the country’s race at Suzuka, with qualifying for the 2004 race postponed to the Sunday. Half points were awarded in Malaysia in 2009 when torrential rain halted the race at Sepang.

The U.S. Grand Prix at Austin’s Circuit of the Americas has also dealt with heavy rainfall and flash floods in the past while snow fell overnight during the October 1976 US Grand Prix in Watkins Glen.

## ARSENAL’S RAMSDALE SIGNS NEW DEAL

England goalkeeper Aaron Ramsdale has signed a new “long-term” contract with Arsenal, the Premier League giants announced yesterday. The 25-year-old has become a mainstay at the Emirates since he joined the north London club from Sheffield United in 2021. His current contract was due to expire in 2025 and, while Arsenal have not disclosed the terms of his new deal, British media reports said it was set to run until 2026, with the option to extend by a further year.

“We’re all so happy that Aaron has signed a new contract,” Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta told the club’s website.

“The way Aaron has developed over the past two years has been exceptional, with his performances, contribution and overall adaptation to the club.

PGA CHAMPIONSHIP

# Fox, Connors, Hovland in lead as Higa stumbles back

AFP  
Rochester, United States

New Zealand’s Ryan Fox, Norway’s Viktor Hovland and Canada’s Corey Connors shared the early lead in yesterday’s opening round of the PGA Championship after a double-bogey disaster for Japan’s Kazuki Higa.

Fox, Hovland and Connors were on 2-under with Higa tumbling back to level at par-70 Oak Hill. World number 99 Higa, making his PGA Championship debut as a back-nine starter, reeled off four consecutive birdies starting at the par-3 11th hole, but a bogey at 17 and a double bogey at the par-4 sixth dropped him from atop the leaderboard.

Higa, last year’s Japan Tour money leader, delivered clutch par putts from eight feet at the first hole and 12 feet at the par-5 fourth but pulled his tee shot way left at six, needed two more to reach the fairway and three from there to finish. He then made bogey at the seventh to reach level par.

No one else pulled away from the early pack. Hovland back at the 10th hole and had two bogeys in three holes then birdied three



Ryan Fox of New Zealand plays his shot from the seventh tee during the first round of the 2023 PGA Championship at Oak Hill Country Club in Rochester, New York. (AFP)

in a row starting at the par-5 13th. Another birdie at the second gave him a share of the lead.

Fox, a three-time winner on the DP World Tour, birdied the par-4 second and par-5 fourth, stumbled with a bogey at the par-3 fifth but birdied the ninth from 11 feet. Connors answered a bogey at the second with birdies on the fifth, sixth and eighth holes.

He began the back nine with a

bogey but birdied 12 to share the lead. Frost delayed the start of the round by one hour and 50 minutes, leaving a group of reigning major champions starting off the 10th tee in warmer than expected weather. World number one Jon Rahm, the reigning Masters champion, started with a birdie at the 10th hole but was 1-over after closing the back nine with three straight bogeys.

Reigning British Open cham-

pion Cameron Smith of Australia was level after the back nine. Reigning US Open champion Matthew Fitzpatrick of England made bogeys at the par-5 13th and par-4 14th and 18th.

Spaniard Rahm, who has taken four PGA Tour titles this year, would be halfway to a calendar-year Grand Slam with a victory at Oak Hill and needing only a British Open to complete the career Slam. World number 10 Jordan Spieth would complete a career Slam with a triumph at Oak Hill. He only decided to play on the eve of the event after testing his injured left wrist for two days at Oak Hill.

Spieth was 2-over after a double bogey at the first, his 10th hole of the round, as he tries to join a list of those to win all four majors that includes Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Ben Hogan and Gene Sarazen.

Scottie Scheffler, who if he wins would overtake Rahm as world number one, birdied the 14th to join a 1-under pack. Also on 1-under were defending champion Justin Thomas, who opened with a birdie at the 10th, and Keegan Bradley shared the lead before a double bogey at the par-3 15th.

Four-time major winner Rory McIlroy was 3-over through 11 holes after bogeys at 15, 17 and 18.

NBA

## Butler fuels Heat in 123-116 game one win over Celtics

AFP  
Los Angeles

Jimmy Butler’s 35 points and a scorching third quarter propelled the eighth-seeded Miami Heat to a 123-116 victory over the Celtics on Wednesday in game one of the NBA Eastern Conference finals in Boston.

The Heat erased a 13-point second-quarter deficit to snatch home-court advantage from the Celtics, out-scoring Boston 46-25 in the third period to seize control.

Jayson Tatum, the 51-point hero of Boston’s game-seven victory over the Philadelphia 76ers, scored 30 points, but he coughed up two crucial turnovers in the final minutes as the Heat turned the defensive screws. Butler added five rebounds, seven assists and six steals. Bam Adebayo scored 20 points with eight rebounds and five assists and Max Strus, Gabe Vincent, Caleb Martin and Kyle Lowry each scored 15 points for Miami.

“We are just playing really good basketball,” Butler said. Once again Butler got off to a hot start, his 12 first-quarter points marking his seventh game of these playoffs with a double-digit first period.

But it was a back-and-forth battle, neither team leading by more than four points in a first quarter that featured 13 lead changes and ended with the Celtics up 30-28. Tatum heated up in the second quarter as the Celtics pushed their lead to as many as 13 points before taking a 66-57 lead into the break. Boston out-scored Miami 40-16 in the paint in the first half, Marcus Smart keeping their aggressive offense clicking with 10 first-half assists – tying his career high for a half.

However, the Heat responded with a vengeance in the third and led by 12 going into the final frame. Bedeviled by 11 first-half turnovers, the Heat had just one in the third period as they dominated every facet.



Jimmy Butler of the Miami Heat is defended by Jaylen Brown (second left) of the Boston Celtics during the fourth quarter of game one of the Eastern Conference Finals in Boston. (AFP)

“I think even the 11 turnovers in the first half is a little bit uncharacteristic for us,” Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. “We were a little bit disjointed offensively in the first half, but also you have to credit them. They got us out of our normal stuff, even though we were able to score 57.

Boston opened the fourth on a 7-0 run and were just four back with 2:31 remaining.

Martin drilled a corner three-pointer off a pass from Butler and after Tatum was whistled for travelling on back-to-back possessions, Butler drained a three-point dagger that put Miami up by 10 with 1:03 to play. Miami made 16 of 31 three-point attempts while the Celtics made just 10 of their 29 from beyond the arc.

Tatum didn’t attempt a basket in the fourth quarter as Miami kept him at bay. Jaylen Brown, who scored 22 points for Boston, got a scare early in the fourth when a loose-ball scramble saw multiple players hit the court and he came up grimacing and holding his left forearm.



## SPOTLIGHT

# Al-Sulaiti clinches inaugural Qatar Karting Championship



Qatar Karting Championship winner Bader al-Sulaiti (centre), runner-up Faesal al-Yafei (left) and third-placed Omar Aswat pose with their trophies at the LCSC New Karting Track on Wednesday night.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**B**ader al-Sulaiti emerged champion of the inaugural Qatar Karting Championship ahead of Faesal al-Yafei and Omar Aswat who came second and third respectively following the fifth and final round at the LCSC New Karting Track on Wednesday night.

Al-Sulaiti, who had notched up two victories throughout the season, accumulated 88 points at the end of five rounds of the series organised by the Qatar Motor and Motorsports Federation (QMMF).

Al-Sulaiti topped the impressive list of 43 entries, and was followed by Faesal al-Sulaiti (70 points) in the second spot, and Omar Aswat (69.5) in third.

Aswat won the Grand Final (Group 2) of the fifth and final round of the series, completing 12 laps at the 1.072-kilometre track in 13:06.435, but it was not sufficient for him to overtake points leader al-Sulaiti, who finished fifth in



Action from the fifth and final round of the Qatar Karting Championship at the LCSC New Karting Track on Wednesday night.

the final race of the season. Khalid al-Muftah came second in the grand final, 6.779 secs adrift of race winner Aswat, while Tameem Hassiba was third at +6.882. Zaid al-Bani was fourth (+10.630) while champion al-Sulaiti finished 10.939 secs behind Aswat.

Earlier, in the Final (Group 1) Jad al-Aawar finished on top, clocking a time

of 13:18.479. Salam Jebriel was a close second at +0.152, while Jean-Pail Gillesse was third (5.930).

## FINAL STANDINGS

1. Bader al-Sulaiti - 88 points; 2. Faesal al-Yafei - 70 points; 3. Omar Aswat - 69.5 points; 4. Tameem Hassiba - 55 points; 5. Khalid al-Muftah - 50 points.

## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Guardiola's masterpiece puts City on brink of maiden title

City thrash Real Madrid 4-0 that exacted revenge for a semi-final exit to Madrid 12 months ago

AFP

Manchester

**M**anchester City's time to conquer Europe may have finally come after Real Madrid were slayed by the English champions on Wednesday night to reach their second Champions League final. City thrashed the Spanish giants 4-0 at the Etihad for a 5-1 aggregate victory that exacted revenge for a dramatic semi-final exit to Madrid 12 months ago.

Pep Guardiola's men are not just closing in on the trophy the club's owners have desired since an Abu Dhabi backed takeover in 2008 began pouring billions of pounds of investment into the club. Victory against Inter Milan in Istanbul next month could complete a treble of Premier League, FA Cup and Champions League, matching local rivals Manchester United's historic achievement in 1998/99.

A fifth league title in six seasons appears a foregone conclusion with City needing a maximum of three points from their final three games. United will have their chance to protect their record as the only English club to do the treble in the first ever Manchester derby FA Cup final on June 3. But City appear to have cleared the biggest hurdle standing between them and immortality by killing off the Champions League monster that is Madrid.

Carlo Ancelotti's men produced a series of thrilling escape acts to win the competition for the 14th time last season. This time City made sure to twist the knife when they had the defending champions on the floor. "It was so painful last season," added Guardiola. "We



Manchester City's Bernardo Silva (left) celebrates with Erling Haaland after scoring against Real Madrid in the Champions League semi-final in Manchester on Wednesday. (Reuters)

had what happened in our stomach for one year. I think today everything came out. I had the feeling these last days that we had a mix of calm and tension to play these type of games. And after 10 or 15 minutes, I had the feeling that all the

pain that we had, what happened last season... it was really tough, losing the way we lost and I think in the moment we had to swallow poison."

The collective brilliance of Guardiola's side shone through on a night

when stars Erling Haaland and Kevin De Bruyne were kept scoreless. Only a hat-trick of stunning saves by Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois to deny Haaland his 53rd goal of the season saved the visitors from a historic humbling.

Bernardo Silva's first-half double was the least City deserved from a near flawless first-half. Even when they took their foot off the gas after the break, Manuel Akanji's deflected goal and Julian Alvarez's cool finish in stoppage time gave the scoreline a fair reflection.

Guardiola said on the eve of the game that his legacy in Manchester was "already exceptional". But a failure to win the Champions League at City has always been a stick to beat the former Barcelona and Bayern Munich boss.

Guardiola's last lifted the European Cup 11 years ago, with a 3-1 win over Manchester United at Wembley the high point of his glorious four-year spell in charge of Barca. Seven years into his reign at the Etihad, City got their equivalent as the might of Madrid were made to look mediocre.

"One of the highest," said Guardiola on where the performance ranked in his managerial career. The style, as much as the success, of that Barcelona team was why City built an entire sporting structure to lure Guardiola to the Etihad. His former colleagues at the Catalan giants Ferran Soriano and Txiki Begiristain were installed as the club's CEO and sporting director to entice Guardiola to England. The marriage of seemingly infinite resources from the Gulf and one of the greatest managers the game has ever seen is bearing fruit.

"You cannot always win, but you can try," said Guardiola.

"We have elevated this club to be there every year. This is what makes a big team, that come May or June you are always there fighting for titles."

Already the dominant force in English football, City stand just one match away from finally scratching their Champions League itch.

## Klopp given two-match touchline ban for referee rant

**London:** Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp has been given a two-match touchline ban after questioning the integrity of referee Paul Tierney following the Reds' win over Tottenham Hotspur in April. Klopp landed himself in trouble with the authorities after blasting Tierney following the explosive end to Liverpool's 4-3 win at Anfield.

The German celebrated Diogo Jota's stoppage-time winner, which came after Liverpool had blown a three-goal lead, by charging down the touchline to celebrate wildly in front of fourth official John Brooks. Klopp was booked but later claimed what Tierney said to him was "not OK", claiming he did not know what the official "has against us".

The Football Association - which also fined Klopp £75,000 (\$93,000, 86,000 euros) - said the first game of the ban would be served immediately, with Liverpool facing Aston Villa tomorrow, while the second would be suspended pending the manager's future conduct.

## OXLADE-CHAMBERLAIN, FIRMINO, MILNER AND KEITA TO LEAVE LIVERPOOL

Roberto Firmino, Naby Keita, James Milner and Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain will leave Liverpool after their contracts expire at the end of the season, the Premier League club said as they prepare the ground for a close-season rebuild.

The four players were part of the squad that won the Champions League in 2019 and helped the club win their first English league title in 30 years in the 2019-20 season.

Liverpool are fifth in the standings with 65 points, one point behind fourth-placed Manchester United, who have a game in hand.

## FOCUS

# Uruguay's potential enticed Bielsa to accept coaching job until 2026 World Cup

Reuters

Montevideo, Uruguay

**U**ruguay's new coach **Marcelo Bielsa** said he decided to take the job because it was the most talented group of players that he was likely to have the chance to work with.

The Argentine, who took over following the departure of Diego Alonso after Uruguay failed to reach the last 16 at the World Cup in Qatar, signed a contract until 2026. "I did not have to be convinced... I like the group that have represented the country in recent years," he said in a press conference on Wednesday.

"There are countries that combine the awareness of their power, of their potential, and enhance it through fantasy and illusion. Uruguay has the resources to nurture that illusion. Managing a club is a job of constant intervention and a national team is a job of quickly bringing together high-level talent," he added.

"One of the things that I considered a lot is that I would not have a group of players like the ones Uruguay has at the moment in any other club that can offer me a job."

The former Leeds United manager, who led the team to the Premier League after a 16-year absence, is making his return to coaching following his exit from the club



in February 2022. "I've been out of work for over a year and a lot of that time has been used to get a better understanding of some of the new things football has to offer," added the 67-year-old, who previously coached Argentina and Chile at the 2002 and 2010 World Cups, respectively. "It's been a long time since I've been in charge of national teams. Football, players and resources have changed but I always try to incorporate new

things, new ideas."

Bielsa will begin his tenure with two home friendlies against Nicaragua and Cuba next month and has already planned how he will approach the matches. "I have tentatively generated some (strategies), three players per position or four. Within that group of 33 or 40 players, I will pick the ones I know the least and use these nine days in June to familiarise myself with them."

## FOOTBALL

# World Cup 2026 teams to be based in 'clusters', says Infantino

AFP

Los Angeles

**T**eams at the expanded 2026 World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico will be based in regional clusters during the early rounds to ease travel, FIFA president Gianni Infantino said on Wednesday.

Speaking in Los Angeles to unveil the official logo and branding for the tournament, Infantino said the move was prompted by the scale of the 2026 finals. For the first time the next World Cup will include 48 teams - up from 32 - and will be co-hosted by three countries, another first.

"The challenges will be the whole logistics around it," Infantino said. "It's a continent - three countries and not three small countries either - three big countries. The distances, the time zones, the climatic differences too - altitude in Mexico, sea level in other parts. So for us it's important to create the right environment for the teams

and the fans to be put in the best possible conditions. Meaning not having to travel too much, especially at the beginning. So we will create some clusters where teams will be based depending on the draw and then they will play their games in that particular cluster."

Infantino said travel, and the move towards basing teams in regions, had been discussed at a meeting in Doha last week of the 32 coaches involved in last year's World Cup. "This was one of the advantages of the World Cup in Qatar, where a player, one hour after the game, was in his bed," he said. "(In 2026) there will be some travel involved but we will co-ordinate that and make sure that it will be the best possible conditions for the teams."

Infantino meanwhile hopes the tournament can build on the success of the 1994 finals in the United States, which helped establish Major League Soccer in North America. Asked what he wanted the legacy of 2026 to be, Infantino said: "That soccer will be the number one sport in North America."

Infantino gave no indication as to which of the host cities across the three countries would stage the finale when the venues were announced last year.

Infantino's remarks came as FIFA rolled out a "green carpet" for celebrities and former players at the Griffith Observatory overlooking Los Angeles.

The gala event was held to unveil the official branding for the 2026 tournament. Among the guests was former US international Alexi Lalas, one of the stars of 1994.

Lalas backed Infantino's pledge to base teams in regions. "At the risk of 'grumpy old-manning it', it's not like these guys are sitting in the middle seat in economy on a budget airline or anything," Lalas said on Wednesday.

"They're on charter aircraft all over the place. But having said that, we're obviously talking about six-hour trips, time-zone changes. For a lot of players around the world that fundamentally changes the competition, so a regional type of situation makes sense"